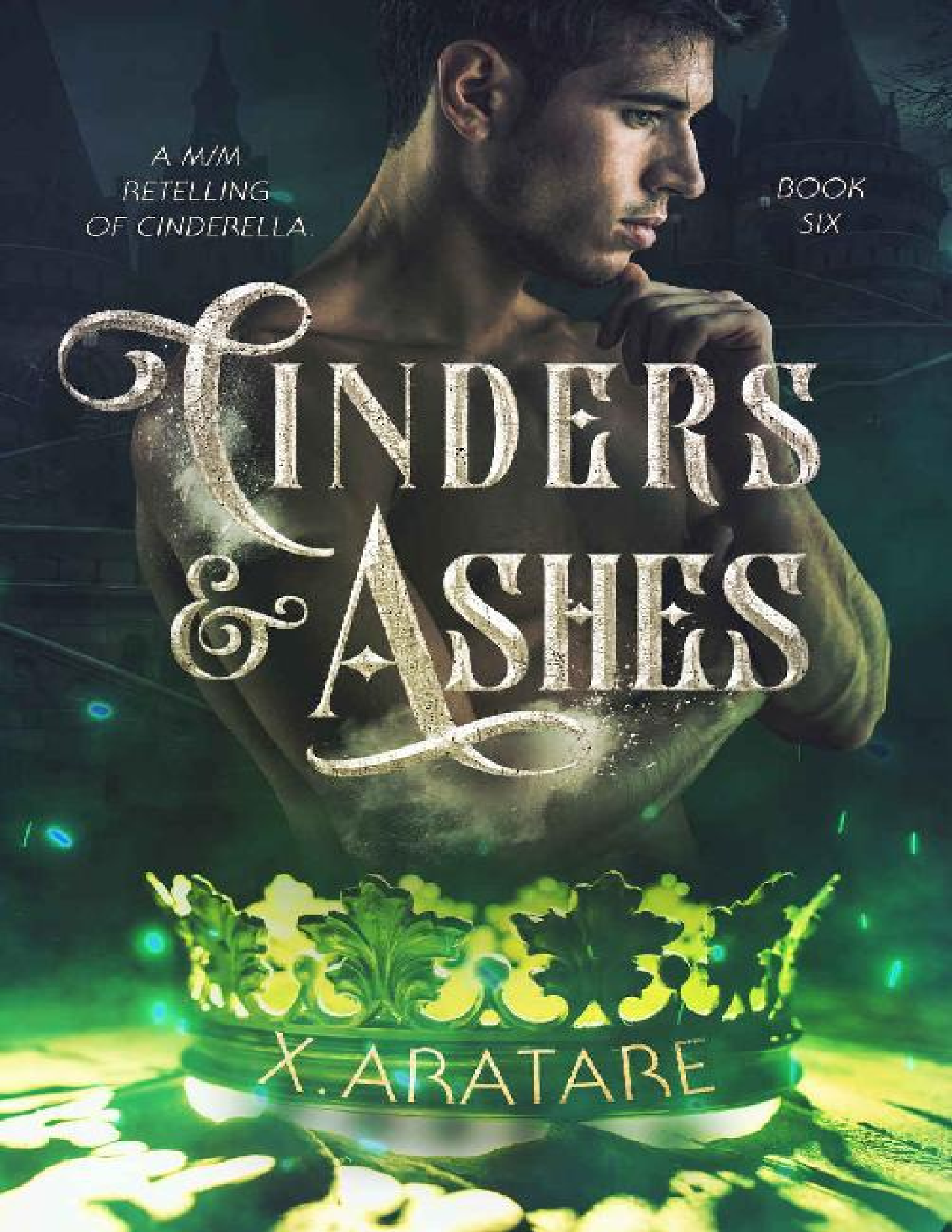
A M/M
RETELLING
OF CINDERELLA.
BOOK
SIX
CINDERS
& ASHES
X. ARATARE

CINDERS & ASHES

A M/M RETELLING OF CINDERELLA (BOOK 6)

X. ARATARE

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WHAT'S HAPPENED SO FAR?

In *Cinders & Ashes* Book 1, Finn Ashton is a servant on his own estate, serving the needs of his obnoxious stepfamily. His stepfather, Lord Gerard Steward, is desperate to gain social approval and marry his two sons, Christopher and Miles, off to nobility. But due to his being the son of a merchant, he is seen as a social climber and would be ignored except for the fact that Tanglewood Manor is the most fertile of any in the Kingdom of Rirea. That fertility is due to Finn's magical abilities.

Finn is a half-blood Fae. His mother was (mostly) human but his unknown father was Fae. Finn has no idea who his father is and claims not to care. But he did give Finn the ability to drain life, mix it with his magic and cause the estate to bloom. He has done this every year since his mother's death when he was 5 years old. The same death that revealed his magic and his Fae heritage. Since the deaths of the prior king and queen of Rirea, allegedly by the Fae King Thalanil Ravenspar's hands, all Fae found in Rirea have been put to death due to suspicions that they have loyalty to King Thalanil. Finn's stepfamily has agreed to keep his Fae blood secret in exchange for him serving them, making the estate bloom and never seeking the title of Lord of Tanglewood.

However, this year, there is so little life in Rirea that Finn is unable to honor his promise to make the estate fertile. Desperate for his stepfamily to keep his secret, Finn steals life from the Fae side of the Wall. The Wall is a magical structure that divides the human Kingdom of Rirea from the Fae Empire of the Eclipse Throne. It was erected right after the deaths of the human regents. Finn hopes this small amount of stolen life won't be noticed, but his hope is a vain one.

As a "reward" for making Tanglewood bloom, Finn's stepfamily gives him a half day off to spend mostly as he wishes. He goes into the Lupine Woods only to find a beautiful man being dragged by his horse and evidence that the Fae are aware of the stolen life.

Little does Finn know that the man he rescues is, in fact, Rohan De Clare, King of Rirea. Rohan has as many troubles as Finn. He knows that his kingdom is dying and suspects that the Wall is draining all the fertility from the soil and changing the normal animals into monsters. His uncle urges him to consider marrying one of the nearby kings or queens to provide Rirea some relief, but Rohan does not wish to surrender Rirea's independence, nor his *own*.

His uncle then suggests he instead have a meeting with all of the surrounding kingdoms, including the war-like and dangerous Achuviel Kingdom and its King Tearlach. That suits Rohan better as, after a magical afternoon with Finn, he cannot imagine wanting anyone but the bewitching young man with the green eyes.

Confessing his love affair to the Captain of the Guard Leonid Blanchet and his noble companion Lord Serxio Lemos, the three of them head out into the Lupine Woods to the cabin where Finn and Rohan have agreed to meet again. The goal is to spruce up the hovel for a romantic picnic. But things

do not go at all as planned.

For his part, Finn has found a new lease on life after his afternoon with the amazing Rohan, who he believes to be a simple noble lord and *not* the King of Rirea due to a misunderstanding and lie that Rohan builds upon. Finn's time is not his own as a servant, but he is determined to see Rohan again. His eldest stepbrother, Christopher, appears to intuit that something is going on with Finn. The two of them make a deal that Finn will help Christopher with his potions meant to restore Rirea's soil in exchange for keeping silent about whatever Finn's getting up to.

But, to Finn's dismay, the next day Christopher and Miles insist on coming into the woods with him to look for herbs for Christopher's experiments. Finn had hoped to grab the herbs and go to the cabin to meet Rohan, but now he is stuck with his step brothers.

As if things could not get more complicated for Rohan and Finn, the two parties meet each other in the woods. They must pretend not to know one another. Christopher, though, seems to recognize Rohan from somewhere. But before any secrets can get betrayed, a section of the Wall lowers and they all see the King of Wolves Tyreon looking at them. When Tyreon begins to move--a move that will lead to an attack in Rohan's eyes--Rohan draws his crossbow and fires, but Finn jumps between the bolt and the wolf, for Finn has dreamed of the great white wolf and knows he means no harm to them.

Finn is struck by the bolt. Tyreon drags Finn's unconscious body to the Fae side of the Wall. While Christopher and Miles run away, Rohan, Serxio and Leonid ride after Finn and Tyreon. While they manage to scare off the king of wolves, when they go to bring back a wounded Finn to the Rirean side of the Wall, they find that the Wall is once again intact and there is no way home.

In *Cinders & Ashes* Book 2, King Thalanil Ravenspar, the ruler of the Fae Empire of the Eclipse Throne, stands on one of Aymar's towers. He has sensed someone draining life from his land and worries that it is his elder brother Marikoth, a Death Mage, who was exiled from the Empire and has found a way around the Wall to strike at him. He had thought that Marikoth was killed by their father long ago, but he was not.

Like all Death Mages, Marikoth killed their mother, potentially accidentally, when he came into his power. This act made their father believe the prophecy that if a Death Mage is allowed to live they will bring about the end of the Empire. But, out of love, their father merely exiled Marikoth and now the danger he poses continues.

But even as Thalanil is haunted by his elder brother's continued existence, he is haunted more by the love he lost. Maeve Ashton, Finn's mother, was the love of Thalanil's eternal life. She ended their relationship without any explanation. The last conversation they had was an argument about whether Death Mages should be killed simply based on a prophecy. Thalanil stated emphatically he would kill any son or daughter of his that showed the signs. Holding a hand against her stomach protectively, Maeve violently disagreed. And that was the last he saw of her.

Thalanil is left alone on the tower of Aymar with an exiled brother, a dead lover and no one and nothing to love.

Next, we turn to Rohan and Finn. These two lovers are separated. Finn's wound from the spelled silver bolt requires a Fae healer and Rohan is intent on finding one. The Wall remains in place and there is no sign of Tyreon, King of the Wolves, to take it down again. The only way to save Finn is on this side of the Wall. He and Serxio seek out a nearby village in the Empire, leaving Leonid to watch over an unconscious Finn. But Rohan and Serxio find more than what they bargained for!

The Fae village is surrounded by a magical fence and Battle Mages patrol the area, making it impossible for Rohan and Serxio to get inside. The need for the magical fence becomes apparent to

both men as the forest is not only very alive, but antagonistic with vines constantly curling around ankles or wrists.

While they are trying to figure out how to get into the village and find a healer, a group of Fae and humans exit it. The humans are bound, wrists and ankles, with chains. They are led to a standing stone out in the forest, secured to it, and seemingly left there for some terrible fate. Rohan and Serxio decide that they must rescue these poor people. As Rohan is cutting through their chains with his magical sword, Lightbringer, something stirs in the forest.

Spiders.

Giant spiders.

Including one named Hex, which is so large as to more resemble an elephant in size than a spider at all. Rohan sends Serxio and one of the few freed humans, Thomas, to go back to the village and gain the help of Thomas' mistress, a Fae healer, for Finn while Rohan continues to free the chained humans and faces off with Hex. While Serxio reluctantly and Thomas eagerly run away, Rohan battles Hex. As he does so, Lightbringer's power seems to grow and change with Rohan feeling that he and the sword have become *one*.

Rohan is successful in his battle with Hex, but only one of the humans survives it, a woman named Emma. She had earlier warned him that Thomas "has no honor" and she is more than right. Thomas and Serxio return with Thomas' mistress, a Fae priestess named Ryleth, but Serxio is in chains and Ryleth, far from being pleased that Rohan has killed Hex, claims that he has sentenced everyone in her village to death. She sends a bolt of magic at Rohan, sending him into unconsciousness.

In the meantime, Finn is dreaming, but thinks he is awake. He is in the Lupine Woods. He is searching for Rohan and the cabin where they were to meet that day to have a picnic. But no matter which direction he goes, all he finds are more trees and no cabin. He feels feverish and weak, along with occasional sharp pains in his side, as if he is suffering from a great illness. But has no recollection of being shot by Rohan or of the events that led to him being dragged into the Empire.

Eventually, Finn does find the cabin, but things are still strange. The woods around the cabin form an impenetrable wall as soon as he enters the clearing. The grass there is sweet and not poisoned. There are signs of occupation in the cabin, but Finn fears it is someone other than Rohan. His illness worsens.

But all seems to get better when Rohan emerges from the cabin, full of joy to see Finn. Yet, for a moment, Finn feels a sense of terrible danger even though this is Rohan who would never hurt him. He's coaxed into the cabin where mounds of furs and blankets await him along with a roaring fire and a feast fit for a king.

But the fire seems to give off no warmth at first, and Rohan also seems oddly unconcerned with certain things like the fact that Tempest is not outside and the woods have formed an impenetrable barrier. But Finn believes that it is his illness making him imagine things, but he doesn't drink the wine that Rohan offers him…

He and Rohan begin to talk about magic where Finn learns about Death Magic and Death Mages for the first time. He is surprised and happy that Rohan seems to know so much. He has never dared speak of magic with anyone else for fear that they would guess he has Fae blood. But with Rohan those concerns are not there.

Yet the conversation takes an odd and terrible turn as Rohan begins to mock Finn for having small dreams. Wanting a bit of meat and a warm fire as his fantasy to be with Rohan, not even wishing to be at the man's estate, appears pathetic in Rohan's eyes. Finn then realizes that this is not Rohan at all. The being pretending to be his love is a Fae Death Mage called Marikoth.

Marikoth imprisons Finn as he tells Finn that he's dying and this is just a dream. The Fae Death Mage explains that he noticed Finn because Finn drained life from the Empire and he wants to know who he is and how much he knows about Death Magic. Marikoth reveals more than he finds out from Finn, because Finn knows nothing about his heredity or his magic. Marikoth is the exiled brother of King Thalanil Ravenspar who is intent on getting revenge on his family and taking the throne for himself. He reveals that Death Mages are only born from the Ravenspar line so Finn *must* be the son of Marikoth and Thalanil's father, or Thalanil, or perhaps even Marikoth himself. Horrified, Finn denies this even as he fears it is true.

But Finn's shock is cut off as he is suddenly sent into a vision. He is in Rohan's paralyzed body as Ryleth, her assistant Tela, her slave Thomas, and Serxio hawk over him. They are discussing Serxio and Rohan's fate. Hex, far from being a monster that they wanted destroyed, was a creature the Fae had made a deal with. In exchange for sacrifices, Hex and her children provided the Fae with a defense against other terrible creatures in the forest. Now, with the deal broken, Hex's children will attack the village so the Fae villagers must flee to the summer palace of Aymar.

Tela wants to simply kill Rohan and Serxio for their acts, but Ryleth sees Lightbringer. She recognizes it as Vudine, the magical sword of House Aeturnal, the former Fae rulers of the Empire. Though Serxio tells her that Lightbringer has been in Rohan's family for ages, she believes he must have stolen it as he is human or, at least, *appears* to be so. But she decides that this is beyond her pay grade and Rohan's fate should be decided by King Thalanil himself. Ryleth also believes that King Thalanil must be told how bad the overgrowth is in the Empire, because their letters begging for help have not had any effect.

Finn is transported out of the vision. Finn realizes from his vision that Rohan is in danger and he must save him. He begs Marikoth to let him go and to even allow Finn to drain a little energy from Marikoth to save himself from death. Marikoth laughs at this.

While fascinated by this vision Finn experienced, Marikoth decides he is going to kill Finn by draining him anyway. Over Marikoth's shoulder, Finn sees a raven made of old feathers, bones and energy. This bird grows until it is a monstrous shadow while Marikoth, unaware, behaves like a drug addict at the thought of draining Finn's life.

Marikoth tries to kill Finn, but his powers don't work on Finn at all. Instead, Finn drains Marikoth. With this first taste of life, Finn almost loses control to the point that he almost kills Marikoth. But Marikoth manages to free himself. Just before he flees the death dream, he sees the massive magical raven and acts both afraid and betrayed at its appearance here before disappearing.

The raven leads Finn out of the death dream and Finn wakes up in the Empire. The life he stole from Marikoth and from the surrounding vegetation there heals his wounds. He has to lie to Leonid about how this happens, believing that Leonid would fear or hate him if he knew Finn had Fae blood, let alone was a Death Mage. He convinces Leonid that Serxio and Rohan are in trouble and they need to go find them.

Rohan wakes up in a cart, chained with Serxio and Emma, the human woman he saved from Hex. The whole village is traveling to Aymar. Ryleth has Lightbringer on her saddle. They intend to get to the village of Tradavor that night and rest before moving on. Rohan begs her to send someone back to get Finn, who is dying. He argues with her that her deal with Hex couldn't have continued indefinitely, because she would have run out of humans to sacrifice to it, and pleads for her not to let Finn die for his actions. Ryleth refuses to help him, because the spiders are coming and her people are her only concern.

The spiders harry them all the way to Tradavor. When they get to the village, the priest of

Tradavor, Samron, refuses to let them in and traps them outside to be killed by the remaining spiders in order to save his own deal with the forest.

Rohan's connection to Lightbringer bursts into life and the sword flies to him. He finds himself repeating an ancient mantra that indicates he is the heir to House Aeturnal. He uses the magic within himself, with Lightbringer as a focus, to kill all of the spiders while sparing all of the Fae. The Fae, Ryleth especially, recognize that Rohan is a fated ruler of the Empire. They are welcomed into Tradavor because of this.

The magical raven that only Finn can see leads him and Leonid to the abandoned village where an Ostil, an enraged tree creature, has entered the space. Leonid tells Finn to run while he sacrifices himself to it so that one of them can get to Rohan and Serxio. Finn determines to use his magic. The raven starts to speak to Finn, urging him to kill the Ostil, but Finn refuses, instead communicating with the enraged creature and convincing it to let them go. Leonid realizes that Finn is magical. He is not afraid but grateful.

Rohan awakes in Tradavor, completely exhausted by the use of his magic, and unable to even stand. He is intent on saving Finn. He makes a deal with Ryleth that he will protect her people on the way to Aymar if she sends someone to bring Finn here and heals him. She agrees and Tela and Serxio are sent to look for Leonid and Finn.

Finn and Leonid hide when Tela and Serxio appear on the road, not realizing who they are at first. Finn uses his Death Magic to paralyze Tela while they greet Serxio. Tela realizes that Finn is a Death Mage at that moment. Assured she is not an enemy, Finn releases Tela and the four of them go back to Tradavor and Finn is reunited with Rohan.

Finn finally tells Rohan the truth about his Fae heritage and his Death Magic. Rohan completely accepts him. They realize that their magic works together. Finn drains life to feed it to Rohan. Rohan has the Aeturnal ability to imbue weapons, jewelry and buildings with enchantments, storing raw magical power within them. They see the possibility of draining the excess life from the Empire and using it to restore the life in Rirea. But that will only work if King Thalanil agrees. Rohan thinks it won't be safe to meet King Thalanil at Aymar, but, instead, to leave a letter with Ryleth to send to him after they figure out a way to get back to Rirea.

They make their way along the road to Aymar, but the forest is aggressive and blocks their path. Finn drains the excess life from the questing, invasive vines, but he takes too much inside himself and fails to feed the excess energy to Rohan. He releases the energy, carving a massive canyon into the forest. Those that didn't realize he was a Death Mage, do now. Only Ryleth is pleased by this development.

It turns out that Ryleth used to be the head of her order, but her belief that the Aeturnals and Death Mages are necessary to control the overgrowth in the Empire was considered heretical and she was stripped of her titles and sent to the tiny village as punishment. She gives Finn translated pages about a love story between the two last Aeturnal and Death Mage couples. She urges him to understand that he and Rohan are meant to be and that their abilities can save both the Empire and Rirea.

Just as they are about to enter Aymar, they discover that Emma has been murdered by Thomas. She found out that Thomas and Tela intended to out Rohan and Finn to Ryleth's old order. They killed her to stop her from telling Rohan and Finn their plan. Ryleth, Rohan, Finn, Serxio and Leonid chase Tela and Thomas into Aymar, but end up splitting up, with Finn going after Tyreon.

Tyreon leads Finn to King Thalanil. Thalanil recognizes Finn as the one that drained life from his Empire and a Death Mage. He alleges that Finn is a killer. Finn claims not, but then Thalanil reveals that every Death Mage kills their mother upon entering into his power. Finn realizes then that he killed

his own mother. Her wasting disease wasn't a disease at all, but was caused by him draining her.

Thalanil is about to kill Finn when he sees Finn's eyes and sees that they are the same as Maeve Ashton's, the woman he loved. This leads to the revelation that Finn is his son and that the reason Maeve ended their relationship was because she feared Thalanil would kill him, because she knew he would be a Death Mage.

Instead of wanting to kill Finn, Thalanil agrees to spare Rohan, Serxio and Leonid's lives if Finn will remain with him in Aymar. The Fae king then demonstrates his great power by sending Rohan, Serxio and Leonid through a magical portal back to Rirea. He promises Rohan that if Rohan ever sets foot in the Empire again, he will be killed.

In *Cinders & Ashes* Book 3, the story begins in Rirea with Marikoth saving a young farm boy, Jeremy, from two neighborhood thugs who have ill intent towards him and his sister, Hannah. But just when Jeremy thinks he's been saved, it turns out that Marikoth is a more deadly monster. It is clear that Marikoth is walking free in the Lupine Woods and doing whatever he wants.

Finn and Rohan are separated by the Wall and their duties, though both long for each other and vow to find a way to be together. Finn and his father, King Thalanil, bond over their mutual love of wyverns and flying. They begin to learn about one another, as people as well as father and son, and discover there is a lot to enjoy about one another. But there are two points upon which they violently disagree.

The first point is about Finn's Death Magic. Finn begs his father to help him learn how to control it and use it for good. Thalanil believes that Finn can simply never use it and, instead, learn traditional magic. Finn wants to believe that's true, but, in his heart, he senses it isn't. But Thalanil will not be moved. Finn is determined to find Ryleth and ask her to teach him.

The second point is about Rohan. Finn insists that Rohan is not only an honorable man and great king, but that Finn loves him and all of Rirea. He wants to be by Rohan's side. And he desires his father to help heal Rirea's dying land, which may require dealing with Marikoth, who lurks somewhere beyond the Wall.

Thalanil believes that he is saving Finn from heartbreak by not allowing him to hold onto things outside of the immortal lands. While Rohan *might* have enough Aeturnal blood in him to be immortal, he might not. Watching Rohan wither and die will be agonizing, not to mention all the mortals that Finn has known up to that point. Better to stay behind the Wall and outlast them and Marikoth. Further, his father reveals that Marikoth, not Thalanil, killed Rohan's parents. They had made a deal with Marikoth to help him overthrow Thalanil, but had repented at the last moment and Marikoth had killed them due to their betrayal. The meeting on the cliffs was to warn Thalanil about his brother's continued existence, but it ended in their deaths, Thalanil's near escape from Marikoth, and the raising of the Wall to keep Marikoth out.

But the raven leads Finn to a Luminus, a magical communication device that Finn recognizes as a twin to one his mother had in Rirea. His father confesses that he and Finn's mother communicated over the Luminus, which syncs time between the two lands when someone is within the Luminus' orbit. But he forbids Finn from using it to contact Rohan or his friends in Rirea. But Finn is not to be deterred. He realizes that the paired Luminus is in Miles' bedroom and if he could but convince one of his stepbrothers to take the Luminus to Rohan, he could speak to the Rirean king! And he does just that!

He secretly speaks to both his stepbrothers over the Luminus and discovers some very distressing things. First, his family and the servants all thought Finn was dead. The servants, Magna, Emmott and Jacob left Tanglewood when his stepfather refused to allow them to have a funeral. In order to punish

Christopher for "losing" Finn out in the Lupine Woods, his stepfather has turned Christopher into the family scapegoat and slave. Gerard has sold or destroyed all of Christopher's alchemical equipment, is starving and beating Christopher, and has retreated into drinking heavily every day.

Finn convinces his stepbrothers to load the Luminus into a cart and take it to Reave Castle and King Rohan. He explains that his stepbrothers will be safe from Gerard there. Christopher eagerly agrees, but Miles only does so when Finn lies that he'll come back to the Manor and serve them. In the end though, Christopher is the only one to take the Luminus and escape Tanglewood while Miles retreats back to Gerard in fear. Through sheer will and determination, Christopher makes it to Reave Castle and Rohan who takes him in.

While that has been Finn's experience, Rohan has spent every day searching for the tree with leaves of glass, determined to destroy the Wall and get to Finn. He works alongside his beloved friends, Serxio and Leonid, but also with his Uncle Hugues, who Rohan isn't sure he can trust. For when they were sent back from the Empire to Rirea, he found that his uncle had already taken the throne and contacted the leaders of Bolan, Sultane and the Achuviel Kingdom to come for a summit at Reave Castle to discuss an alliance against Thalanil.

While Hugues cedes the throne back to Rohan, Rohan discovers that his uncle knew not only about Finn's existence as the son of his former lover and King Thalanil, but also the horrible circumstances that Finn was living in yet did nothing to help him. Further, Hugues' seeming deep knowledge of the Aeturnals disturbs Rohan. He feels he cannot trust his uncle even as the man provides him with books that speak of the Aeturnals and how they ruled with their "Bonded Ones" until the gods turned against them.

Serxio had a mad plan to stand on the old road that connected Aymar and Reave Castle, right by the Wall, and have a banner trying to get Thalanil--but, more importantly, Finn's--attention. Rohan no longer believes that Thalanil is his enemy, rather it is Marikoth, but he needs all the help he can get against the Death Mage. But on their way to put up the banner, a mob of people from the city meets them in the streets.

It turns out that homeless and poor people have been disappearing from the city recently and the mayor has refused to investigate. Rohan does and finds Hannah, the young farm girl whose brother, Jeremy, was "saved" by Marikoth, whom she calls the "Glowing Man", in town. The girl explains in halting terms what the Glowing Man did to her brother and neighbors and warns that she's seen him in town. Rohan, Serxio and Leonid realize that Marikoth is stalking Dawnmore's streets and beyond. They must track him down and stop him!

They start their hunt for Marikoth at Hannah and Jeremy's old farmhouse. They soon find strange tracks that lead into the Lupine Woods. Following these, they come upon a beautiful glade where someone is clearly living, except they aren't there at that moment, but three undead are, Jeremy included.

Rohan, Serxio and Leonid battle the three undead, realizing that the only thing that can kill them is fire. But after those three are dead, they hear countless undead moans from all around them. Rohan exhausts his magic to protect himself and his friends from the undead horde, and they would have been overcome had not King Tearlach and his warriors ridden to their aid.

The giant Achuvien king still seems to have romantic intentions towards Rohan, but he keeps them light and teasing, even when he realizes that Rohan cares for someone else. But he does reveal that he, too, knows Marikoth. The Death Mage had been his Court Magician until Marikoth betrayed him in some way. The undead, Tearlach claims, are Marikoth's creations and he has been tracking the Death Mage and the undead from his own kingdom. He's also there for the summit.

They return to Reave Castle and discover Christopher there with the Luminus. They are able to all speak to Finn and fill each other in on everything that's happened. Finn is alarmed at talk of the undead. He is glad that Christopher is safe and it is agreed that Christopher will stay on at the castle as an alchemist. Rohan gives Christopher some of the books he discovered in Marikoth's glade to examine. They need to know how Marikoth is turning villagers into the creatures they faced.

Finn and Rohan promise that they will speak to one another regularly over the Luminus to keep each other informed as well as simply to see one another. Finn is convinced he can change Thalanil's mind about Rohan. But before they get to speak again things take a dark turn in the Empire.

While Finn is outside Aymar's walls--having found Ryleth and other villagers--the palace is attacked by hundreds of enraged Ostils, the tree-like creatures that Finn faced before in Ryleth's village. He and Ryleth go to help, with Finn believing he can possibly speak to the Ostils like he had earlier. But they cannot be reached. They are insane and intent on killing everyone. Finn realizes he has no other choice but to use Death Magic to save the day.

Thalanil has been trapped inside with his Council, including Lord Paquen--who is eager to get more power--and Lady Beinelis--Thalanil's trusted friend--sparring over whether there's something suspicious about Thalanil's human-looking son, Finn. There are rumors already that he's a Death Mage. When the Ostils come, and Finn levitates into the sky, and destroys them all except one to go back and tell others to stay away, all doubts are gone.

But Finn collapses after the battle and falls into a death-like sleep where the raven speaks to him. It claims to be the God of Death and Finn is its Chosen. Then Finn is thrust into a strange vision. It's of Christopher in the lower levels of Reave Castle being chased by the undead…

In *Cinders & Ashes* Book 4, Thalanil has left an unconscious Finn in Ryleth's care as he travels at all due speed to see his father in order to find out about Death Mages and Death Magic to help his son. But while the Empire has survived its attack by the Ostils, Reave Castle is now in danger from the undead!

But there's more danger from the living. Marikoth has infiltrated the castle and is holding Rohan hostage unless Finn returns to Rirea immediately, which Finn discovers by sharing Rohan's body like he did once before when Rohan faced Hex. Marikoth makes clear that he no longer simply wants revenge against his family for exiling him, but believes that he and Rohan are destined to restore and rule the Empire together. He is a Death Mage and Rohan is the Heir of House Aeturnal. Not to mention that Finn is simply too good-hearted to do what has to be done: namely overthrow Thalanil. Rohan rejects him, but Marikoth is not dissuaded.

Desperate to save Rohan, the raven appears to Finn and tells him that the only way to return to Rirea and save Rohan is to fly Silver Soul, the wyvern queen who is said to kill anyone who attempts to ride her. Finn has no other choice and he goes to the Wyvern Tower where he approaches the huge wyvern. Despite her fierce reputation, they are able to speak telepathically and she agrees to help him. For her the Wall is not even there, which hints that she might be more than she seems.

She flies Finn to Reave Castle in time. He fights his way to Rohan through seas of undead despite the fact that his Death Magic does not seemingly work against them. It is the magical ring, Amarathar, that saves the day. Finally, Finn faces off against Marikoth, or rather only thinks he does. Marikoth shows him a fantasy where he is a beloved nephew and student of Marikoth's and Rohan is Finn's husband. But Finn sees through the trick when he realizes his father is nowhere to be found in this fantasy.

In fact, Marikoth is asking *Finn* where his father is. It is then that Finn realizes Marikoth believed that the only way Finn could get to Reave Castle in time was to convince Thalanil to teleport him

there. And since Thalanil would never send his son alone to face Marikoth, the Death Mage believed that Finn would bring Thalanil right to him. Both realize their mistake. For Thalanil is nowhere to be found and the "Marikoth" that Finn faces is just a glamourized undead.

Having saved Rohan from Marikoth, Finn decides to stay in Rirea to keep Rohan safe from the other Death Mage. Rohan not only recovers from Marikoth's draining, but after he and Finn make love, the entire castle starts to bloom. Through the joining of their powers, Rohan and Finn are able to restore the rose garden at Reave Castle. This gives both of them hope that they can save Rirea together.

But it is what they find *beneath* the castle that raises more questions than answers. There is a tomb of the last Aeturnal king and his Bonded One below the castle. The statues of these two former rulers of the Empire show visages almost the exact same as Rohan and Finn's, leading the two to wonder if they are not these beings reborn.

Also in this tomb, the ceiling is carved to show a war these two fought against a mighty army of monsters called the Dreadbrood. The Dreadbrood, as Tearlach explains, is the God of Death's army and it can only be controlled by Death's Chosen. Finn is shaken by this supposed myth as *he* was called Death's Chosen by the raven.

The tomb is also filled with scrolls, tomes and other ancient writings, which may explain and answer all the questions that these revelations bring. But they are all written in ancient Aeturnal dialects, including Achuvien. Rohan calls in all of the professors from the University to study them and get him and Finn some answers.

Meanwhile, Rohan is determined that Finn should be made Lord of Tanglewood once more. He formally recognizes Finn as the true lord of the manor and it is determined that they return to Tanglewood to eject Gerard Steward from Finn's family home. Finn has Magna, Jacob and Emmott brought to the castle to reveal not only that he is not dead, but that he is Crown Prince of the Empire and Lord of Tanglewood. They had left the Manor after his death, but all eagerly agreed to return to take care of the estate.

A highly unwilling Christopher agrees to accompany Finn, Rohan, Serxio and Leonid on this mission. He has been studying the book that Rohan found in Marikoth's camp and experimenting on the undead. But his unwillingness to return to Tanglewood does not wholly stem from a desire not to leave his work. It becomes clear that Christopher has deep seated guilt about how he behaved when at the Manor. He knew that if he attempted to help others that not only would it be made worse for them, but also, he would draw his father's wrath. In fact, he allowed the servants to believe he had killed another servant named "Old Jonathan" because he wasn't altogether sure his father hadn't. Better to take the blame than face his father's wrath. When he reveals all of this to everyone, he receives forgiveness that he does not think he deserves, but it breaks through his icy exterior.

All of them return to Tanglewood only to find it worse than they ever imagined. Without the servants there to take care of things, the whole house has fallen into filth and disarray. Gerard has taken to drinking constantly in Maeve's old study. Miles has taken to hiding in his room, a ghost of himself compared to what he was before. He hasn't eaten in some time and is terrified of his father.

Rohan is outraged when he truly sees how Finn was living at the Manor. He, Serxio and Leonid forcibly eject Gerard from the Manor. Rohan informs the drunken, rageful Gerard that his crimes against Finn mean that he should be executed, but it will be up to Finn what his fate is.

Finn confronts his stepfather and, in doing so, he sees himself sitting on a strange throne with an icy crown, radiating death. The sky goes dark and is split in two by lightning. Everyone is terrified. But Rohan touches Finn and guides him back to himself.

Finn determines that Gerard should be exiled for his crimes. Death would be too good for him. Imprisonment would mean that they would be haunted by him. So exile it is.

But Finn is haunted more by what happened when he confronted his stepfather rather than his fate. He starts to wonder who and *what* exactly he is.

In *Cinders & Ashes Book 5*, Ryleth wakes up to find herself imprisoned in Aymar's dungeons with Thomas, the human slave who killed Emma. Evidently, Tela had him imprisoned right after she assisted him in his escape. Ryleth has no idea why she's been imprisoned and believes that a traitor to Thalanil must have done it. She asks one of the guards to contact Lady Beinelis, who she hopes is still loyal to the crown, who will vouch for her as Mentor to Finn. But, as it turns out, the guards know exactly who she is and that is why she is imprisoned. The guard strikes her with a magical weapon that sends her into unconsciousness.

We then return to Rirea, where the mystery over whether Finn is a Death Mage or something else deepens. Hugues discovers a book in the crypt regarding Death's Chosen and confronts Finn with it. He claims the book states that the Death's Chosen is solely created to destroy the Aeturnal Heir and Hugues intimates that he believes Finn is this being. Angry and hurt, Finn causes lightning to split the sky. Finn takes the book from Hugues and sends him away, claiming Hugues only wishes to break Finn and Rowan apart. Despite his confident words, Finn fears Hugues might be right.

Finn, Rohan and the boys head out to restore a field using their magic. They go to the field in Rirea that is the most drained, the most dead. When they reach their destination, all of them are struck by something *off* about the place. It inspires Serxio to tell them a story about a supernatural creature that burrowed into the ground and caused the land to turn to dead, grave matter.

Despite being completely unnerved by the location and the story, Finn and Rohan attempt to restore the land. They sink their consciousnesses deep into the earth in order to find some scrap of life left, but what they discover is the antithesis of that. They discover the Dreadbrood, Death's army of the dead, resides in a cavern beneath Rirea!

Finn and Rohan quickly retreat from the Dreadbrood, afraid that they might awaken them. They become convinced that the cavern must be able to be accessed by the catacombs under Reave Castle. Finn is determined to find them while Rohan must greet Queen Artremaya, Ruler of Sultane, who had just arrived for their summit.

Rohan and Artremaya find common ground between them as both their lands are being ravaged by death. While they speak, Finn goes into the crypt, but is unable to locate an entrance to the cavern where the Dreadbrood sleeps. He does meet up with King Tearlach. He asked the Achuvien king to translate the book he took from Hugues as it is written in ancient Achuvien. Tearlach agrees but is surprised by Finn's trust in him. Finn suggests that perhaps they could be friends or allies, at least.

We return to the Empire where Ryleth, once more, returns to consciousness in a cell in Aymar's dungeons, but she is not alone. Tyreon has arrived and his ability to dampen magic has affected the magical bars of her cell. The clever wolf gets the keys from a sleeping guard, but she is forced to release Thomas from his imprisonment as well otherwise he threatens to reveal her escape. After picking up Tyreon's family, they all flee to Rirea.

Exhausted from the day's events, Finn goes to rest in his and Rohan's rooms when he sees the Wall flicker and go out for a moment. Silver Soul tells him that she saw Marikoth entering the Fae Empire. Shocked and terrified by what Marikoth might do, Finn flies on Silver Soul's back to the Empire without letting Rohan know.

Thalanil teleports back with his father and Shadeheart from Old Norbreask to the top of the Wyvern Tower at Aymar. His father is dying of poison and he is intent on saving him so much that he

doesn't realize anything is wrong until he senses Marikoth approaching. Thalanil is confronted by Marikoth along with Lady Beinelis, Lord Paquen, the Keeper of the Order Lyari and her assistant, Tela. Marikoth has come to claim the throne from Thalanil and everyone with him agrees that he should be king, not Thalanil.

They blame Thalanil for the overgrowth and the madness of the creatures in the Empire despite the fact that these things have been happening well before Thalanil was born. While Thalanil agrees that a Death Mage may be the answer to control these changes in the Empire, he states emphatically that Marikoth is not the one to do so, but that Finn should rule if they wish a Death Mage to be king. Marikoth intimates that Finn is a monster and not a Death Mage at all.

Realizing that they intend to crown Marikoth, Thalanil attacks his brother, but his magic only feeds Thalanil. Realizing this, he draws his magical blade, Kharazack or Ghostbringer as it was known in Common, and attempts to strike Marikoth down. But Thalanil is quickly overcome by his brother's Death Magic. Their father and Shadeheart attempt to intercede to save him, but both are drained to death by Marikoth. Just as Marikoth is about to kill Thalanil, Finn appears. It is clear that Marikoth fears Finn and bargains to give Thalanil to him, alive, if Finn will not attack him and leave the Empire immediately. Finn agrees to his terms. He flies back to Rirea with Thalanil.

Rohan's meeting with Queen Artremaya is interrupted with the return of Finn, Thalanil and Silver Soul. A dragon–or wyvern–in the courtyard causes quite the ruckus. Thalanil is rushed to a bedroom to rest while doctors are summoned. Silver Soul goes back out and returns with Ryleth, Thomas, Tyreon, Skye and their pups. If a wyvern causes a ruckus, the pups cause an even larger one as everyone falls in love with them. Despite misgivings, Rohan allows Thomas to live, but he must prove that he is worthy of this second chance by serving in the castle. He then hurries to where Thalanil is recovering.

When Rohan encounters Thalanil, who is still unconscious on the bed, he realizes that he can restore the life that has been stolen from the Fae king. Just like the Aeturnals did with the power stones, he "fills" Thalanil back up with magic. It works perfectly, but instead of being grateful, Thalanil puts a blade to his throat. Finn stops his father from hurting Rohan, chastising him for attacking the person who saved him, but Thalanil is still too traumatized by what happened to him and the loss of his father and Shadeheart to truly believe Rohan is not an enemy.

While Thalanil rests, Finn and Rohan want to catch up with Ryleth and all that has occurred in the Empire, but Finn dare not leave his father alone. Yet he can't have Rohan in the same room with him either. Finn asks his stepbrother, Miles, to stay by Thalanil's side while he attends to his other duties. Miles eagerly agrees, wanting to help.

After his and Finn's successful catch up with Ryleth, Rohan has another altercation with his uncle who tells him all about Death's Chosen and his belief that Finn is a being created by Death to destroy the Aeturnals. Rohan is not impressed by the argument, but, more importantly, he is devastated once more by what he sees as Hugues' betrayal of him. Hugues contends that all he is doing–all he has *ever* done–is for Rohan's benefit, even if Rohan hates him for it.

The next day, Thalanil has recovered to the point that he is anxious to do something–*anything*–to regain his kingdom, but he knows that his great powers only make him more vulnerable to Marikoth. But Miles tells him about Christopher's attempts at alchemy in order to undo the spells and potions that Marikoth used to create the undead. Intrigued, and certain that no human could possibly understand such things, Thalanil goes down to Christopher's laboratory. What he finds shocks him to his core for Christopher is close to unraveling the secret of the undead. With a little help, Thalanil believes that he and Christopher can solve this mystery. Christopher eagerly accepts Thalanil's help

while Miles sits in a corner, content to be near them both in case he's needed, but not too happy about the smell.

Finn and Rohan had a very *furry* night as all of the wolves slept in the same bed with them *after* they made love. Rohan realizes that he must build a bigger bed as the wolves are not going anywhere else and he can't quite deny their fuzzy faces or Finn's big eyes on their behalf.

After breakfast with Serxio and Leonid, they all head down to Christopher's laboratory when they realize that Thalanil is working with him. Queen Artremaya joins them. Not only have they re-created the potion that creates the undead, they resurrect an evil convict and Thalanil shows Christopher how to control him.

While watching them take over control of the undead, Finn can see the magic that connects the undead to their makers and he realizes that he could anchor a whole army of the undead to the living. Perhaps this is how he could fuel the Dreadbrood and use it against Marikoth! Finn is also easily able to take control of the undead himself from his father and stepbrother while they cannot take it from him.

Finn confronts the raven about this ability and the fact that it called him "Death's Chosen" before. The raven confirms that it is the God of Death and Finn is not a Death Mage at all. Finn is alarmed by this last fact, because he believes that Rohan is destined to be with a Death Mage and if he is not one… But the raven tells him he must accept who he is, and if Finn does, then it will give him control of the Dreadbrood, the only army that can defeat Marikoth. And maybe it will let him keep Rohan too.

Finn takes Thalanil to the crypt of the last Aeturnal and Death Mage. Finn confronts his father about his enmity towards Rohan, pointing out that the Fae have few friends outside of the Empire, and that it is only due to Rohan's good heart that Thalanil was saved and allowed to remain here. Thalanil points out that he *is* being magnanimous since Rohan is clearly courting Finn against his wishes. They come upon Ryleth and Crosley arguing in the crypt, which stops their conversation.

Upon seeing the visages of the dead Aeturnal and Death Mage that match Finn and Rohan's, Thalanil begins to understand that Finn and Rohan's connection is not some passing fancy. Finn tells him that he believes that the past and the present are connected. Finn believes that in order for the Empire, Rirea and all the lands to flourish the Empire must be restored to its former borders and that there is some kind of magical connection throughout the lands.

Ryleth believes the power stones are part of the equation and that they are part of a larger network that balanced life and death throughout the Empire. Thalanil realizes that this means Marikoth will invade Rirea, not just out of hunger, but because Marikoth knows he needs Rohan to achieve this permanent balance.

Meanwhile, Rohan, Serxio and Leonid are in Rohan and Finn's bedroom when Marikoth contacts Rohan over the Luminus. Marikoth intimates that he is not the enemy, but Finn is. He further claims that he no longer seeks simple revenge for being exiled, but instead wants to restore the Empire. Rohan reluctantly asks what Marikoth would do to the Queen of Sultane or the King of Bolan to encourage them to accept a restored Empire. Marikoth, of course, does not intend to say anything. Anyone that resists him will be destroyed, which is why Rohan rejects his offer to join them.

Marikoth takes down the Wall and sends creatures into Rirea, which will kill the populace. He will not stop them until and unless Rohan agrees to join with him.

And that brings us up to date!

NOT ENOUGH

"Get Finn! Get the Guard! Get everyone! We must stop the creatures!" King Rohan De Clare roared to Lord Serxio Lemos and Guard Captain Leonid Blanchet.

He could still hear the Death Mage Marikoth Ravenspar laughing over the Luminus as he raced past his friends and the glowing orb. He shot out of his bedroom and into the hallway. Serxio and Leonid scrambled after him, but he kept outpacing them. He outpaced everyone.

Death is coming.

The Wall that had separated Rirea and the Fae Empire was *gone*. How often had he wished it to be gone in the past? Every single day since it had been conjured. But he had wanted that so he could confront King Thalanil Ravenspar for the deaths of his parents. So he could take revenge and heal his kingdom.

Yet now he knew that neither thing was caused by the Wall or Thalanil. It was Thalanil's brother, Marikoth, who was, in fact, responsible for his parents' deaths. The Wall had nothing to do with the draining of Rirea's life. In fact, it had been protecting them from the creatures who had gone mad in the Empire.

But now those monsters were coming through. Not naturally, that was for certain. For what monster would come to his ruined and blighted kingdom where life hung by a thread and there was nothing to eat? No, they were being forced to enter the kingdom. Whipped into a frenzy by Marikoth, they were sent to Rirea in a fury. They were sent to kill.

And he won't stop sending them until I agree to bond with him. But that will only delay the end. Only Finn and I can save this world. But will we survive Marikoth long enough to fulfill our destiny?

If he bonded with Marikoth, the deaths he strove to stop now would still occur. Those and *more*. Much, much more. For Marikoth had no desire to rule justly. The hunger inside of him had no limit, could not be satisfied, and would consume the Death Mage eventually. Even without that hunger driving him, Marikoth simply wished to possess what he considered his and whoever sought to stop him would be destroyed. And Rohan was sure that top on that list of people he would kill were the ones that Rohan loved the most.

Rohan flew down the stairs. He nearly barreled into Queen Artremaya, Ruler of Sultane, as she calmly pulled on her gloves. She had been expecting to meet him for a ride around the kingdom. She had visited when she was a child, but her favorite spots were likely only a distant memory now. But she had insisted upon seeing them. She had to know what was in store for her kingdom. Perhaps it was the Dreadbrood's presence beneath his land that caused the blight to be stronger here than elsewhere, but soon, all of the former Aeturnal Empire would perish unless something drastic was

done.

"King Rohan!" she gasped as he grabbed her shoulders to stop her from spinning around and falling onto her backside.

"Queen Artremaya, the Wall is down! Monsters are coming! I must go!" The shouted words hardly made sense to his own ears. He dared not believe she would understand. But he had no time to explain.

Her eyes widened and, thankfully, he saw understanding fill them. Without hesitation, she said, "Then I will join you."

"You'll need a weapon and all your bodyguards," he said. "I cannot wait for–"

"Go! Go! I will catch up with you and will gather anyone else I find," she assured him and raced back up to her room without another word.

He was grateful she was as practical and intelligent as she seemed. He was lucky to have her as an ally. But those thoughts left him as he sprinted into the courtyard. A young female Guard was leading her horse towards the stables. She gave a yelp when he grabbed the reins from her hands and leaped up onto its back.

"What–my king!" she cried in shock and amazement. Her face clearly showed her confusion as to why he should take her horse in this manner.

"The Wall is down! The monsters are coming!" he shouted over his shoulder at her even as he dug his heels into the horse's flanks.

He heard Leonid's commanding voice, "Saddle up! Crossbows! Swords! Shields! We're under attack!"

Rohan did not wait for Leonid and the Guard to catch up with him either. He rode his horse hard out of the courtyard and across the Silver Bridge. He thundered past an elderly man who was tottering slowly down the lane. The man let out a "whoa!" and pitched backwards onto his rump. Rohan hoped he was unhurt, but he could not slow to check.

There was a matronly woman and two children on either side of her about to cross the lane in front of him. He shouted at them to clear the way. He saw huge eyes and open mouths as he sped past. The woman clutched her children tightly to her, missing being trampled underfoot by inches. He shouted his apologies, but he doubted she heard them.

As he cleared the edge of City of Dawnmore, he heard the creatures' anguished cries as they crashed through the Empire's overgrowth and into the devastated Lupine Woods. Their calls echoed eerily on the wind. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. How many had gotten through? How fast could they move? How would he stop them all? Was it even possible to stop them all? Even if he could summon the power he had against the spiders, would that be enough?

He prayed that Finn and Thalanil would come soon. Their magic was as necessary, if not more so, than his own. Thankfully, Lightbringer was fully charged. He could use it to cut down as many creatures as he could see. But would that be enough?

No, it will not be enough, his own brain murmured treacherously. *Can you kill every creature in the Empire? Do you want to? Such devastation…*

He was the Heir of House Aeturnal and yet he felt completely incapable of anything magical right now. What use was one magic sword against an army of creatures? Without some way of turning them back and keeping them out, there was no way to win this battle.

How many deaths will there be that I cannot stop? How many before I must surrender to Marikoth?

But he knew that was the wrong thing to do. He reminded himself that surrender now would just

lead to more death later. But was there any other choice? If only he'd had more time to learn the powers of the Aeturnals! If only his uncle had told him the truth about the blood in their veins and what he could be! If only he had a teacher!

But these were vain wishes. He had only what he had. Nothing more. Nothing less. Somehow he must find a solution.

He galloped out onto farmland that had started to recover as it was nearest the castle. His and Finn's lovemaking had started to spill over onto the surrounding lands and he hadn't even known it. Over two dozen people were working the field, tending the plant life with loving care, trying to nurture the cabbages, carrots and spring onions to keep producing. But they had heard the cries too. They were frozen. All eyes were on the woods.

"Momma, the–the trees are moving!" One girl wailed as she pointed a shaking, grubby hand towards the edge of the woods.

Her mother, a worn woman with creases around her eyes and dirt covering her hands, followed her daughter's finger. "What? No, that can't be! That… oh, by the gods…"

The girl was not wrong. Whole trees appeared to have come to life and were *walking*. They brayed their rage. Their branch-like arms thrashed through their non-walking, non-talking brethren. The woods they destroyed splashed their poison everywhere as their trunks were crushed and sliced and gouged. The poison maddened the walking trees even further. Rohan could hear–and *feel*–their pain as the poison was sucked up unwittingly through their live roots or sizzled through their bark-like skin to simmer in their veins.

No! No! They're being destroyed!

He was surprised that *this* was his first thought. Not gladness that they were being poisoned and thereby weakened, but pain that they were going to die. He felt the wrongness of it in his bones. The Lupine Woods was an abomination. He did not want it to claim more victims and these tree-like beings were only here because Marikoth had forced them to come.

I'm sorry, he thought. *So sorry.*

The tree-like creatures were the *least* of the dangers he saw as he threaded his unwilling horse through the rows of vegetable marrows. He saw an albino beast that was a cross between the great apes he had seen in books and a rhino. It had a single, large eye in the center of its sloping forehead with horns curling out of its head on either side. Its massive forelimbs tore up the ground, the trees and anything else that came too close. A pack of them had brought one of the tree-like beings to the ground, ripped off its branches and they were beating its torso with them in malicious glee.

This is not how it should be! This is not right!

Cat-like creatures with massive shoulders and haunches and slit-like flame eyes moved with sinuous grace between the tree trunks. They opened their mouths, emitting long, serpentine tongues as if tasting the air for prey. One of them leaped up twenty-feet into the air to land on a tree where two large branches split from the trunk. It surveyed the field and the farmers and him. The tongue flickered out again.

Toads as big as he was with armored backs and chests hopped forward. Powerful tongues snapped out between their lipless mouths to grab bugs as large as his fist that flitted around them. The tongues retracted and only a bit of wing could be seen between those closed mouths as the toad chewed.

There were crabs half the size of his horse with dark red shells and front pincers that could have snipped the head from his body with one snap. Their chitinous forms *clicked* as they skittered over the ground with shocking speed. The foremost one saw the little girl and her mother. Its black eyes on tall

stalks swiveled around and locked onto them. The pincers flexed and released. He imagined them picking at their corpses after they had ripped off the mother and daughter's heads.

"Get back!" Rohan shouted at the people. "Run!"

He unsheathed Lightbringer from its place on his back. The sword glowed as bright as the sun. The woman lifted a hand to shield her eyes. The little girl gasped. It was magic. They recognized it for what it was. Magic that their king wielded.

"Run!" Rohan commanded again. "Save yourselves! I will fight these creatures!"

"But we'll lose the crop!" A young man said as he lifted up a hoe he had been using to tend the plants, but now it looked more like a weapon. His eyes were huge in his head and he was so thin that Rohan thought he could have broken him in half easily over his knee.

"You'll lose your lives if you stay!" Rohan cried, his horse rearing up beneath him as he lifted Lightbringer high up above his head.

"We'll lose our lives without this crop!" A middle-aged woman shouted. There was dirt smeared across her forehead, sticking there because of sweat. She, too, had a hoe and was brandishing it like a weapon. "We won't leave!"

It's that dire, he realized. *Of course, it is*.

This crop was their life. It was all they had left. He could only afford to import so much food and not everyone got enough of those shipments. This bit of land that had started to bloom was his people's hope, their lifeblood.

"We'll fight with you, King Rohan!" An elderly man shouted.

He looked over his shoulder. Riders on horses–Serxio, Leonid, his Guard, Queen Artremaya, and her bodyguards–were all riding hard towards them, but they would not get here in time. He did not see Finn, Thalanil or Silver Soul. He knew Finn and Silver Soul would defend their people, but would the Fae king? And would Thalanil allow his son to risk himself for humans? Rohan could only hope it was so. But he had to act as if he was on his own.

There was a scream. His head snapped back around. The crab-like creature, who had skittered out of the woods towards the girl and her mother, had turned from predator to prey. The cat-like monster had jumped down from the tree above on *top* of the crab, crushing it into the ground for a moment, before launching itself towards the two women itself.

He was too far away to physically get between them and the cat-like creature. But a blast from Lightbringer turned the creature into ash. The mother clasped her daughter to her chest, curling over her protectively, even as she stared open-mouthed at where the creature had been, but where now only ash drifted.

The crab had recovered from being pressed down into the earth. It shook off the soil and scuttled forward eagerly. He urged his horse into a gallop and swung down at the creature's nearest chitinous legs. Lightbringer cut through them as if there was nothing there but air. It collapsed on its side as its legs were no longer there to hold it up. The crab squealed. Its squeal caused his eardrums to ring.

Its fellows scurried towards its wounded form and, just as he'd imagined them doing to the mother and daughter, the crabs began to eat their injured comrade alive. More shrill squeals deafened him as they plucked out the wounded crab's eyes and pulled off its back plate to get at the tender meat inside.

He wheeled his horse around as the squeals had attracted the attention of the ape-like things. The group that had taken down the tree-creature–-which was no longer moving–sat up on their hind legs. Their single blood red eyes tracked him. They made low hooting sounds to one another. He imagined them communicating their attack plan in a simple language. There were five of them. Three went to

the right while the other two moved towards the left. They placed the backs of their knuckles on the ground and then swung their bodies forward.

They're flanking me!

And they were moving at speed.

Thankfully, the woman and child had finally run away. He saw their backs as they raced over the fields in abject terror. The other farmers were still there. As Rohan sent blasts of light at the two apes that came for him from the right, the thin farmer braced his hoe before him, teeth bared, as the first albino ape from the left raced towards him. The thin farmer let out a war cry and brought the hoe around in a powerful arc. It struck the albino ape's shoulder, gouging out a section of furry shoulder. Black blood spurted from the wound and the ape let out a howl, clutching its wounded arm. It stopped its movement towards Rohan, pivoting instead towards the thin farmer who stared at the bloodied end of the hoe as if he couldn't quite believe he'd struck the thing.

"Don't just stand there, Plen! Hit it again!" the old farmer shouted encouragement to the thin one.

Plen was shaken out of his shock at those words, which were just in time as the ape roared at the young man and pounded its chest before it launched itself towards him. Plen swung the hoe again, but the ape effortlessly batted it aside. The thin farmer let out a shrill scream as he tripped over a vegetable marrow and landed on his ass. The ape was almost upon him.

Rohan sought to send a blast at the ape, but the other three were suddenly in front of him. His horse reared and he was sent flying back from his saddle. Somehow, he twisted and landed on his feet. But the horse was not so lucky. The apes were on top of it, tearing at its flesh as they pulled it down. It let out whinnies of terror and pain. Its eyes rolled back white and there were *cracking* sounds as the apes broke its bones. Blood flew as the ape wrenched the horse's head around, snapping its neck and ripping it off. He swung Lightbringer and a wave of light engulfed the apes and the horse. When the light cleared, nothing of any of them or the horse remained.

Rohan spun around towards where he had last seen Plen and the final ape. He expected to see the farmer's head being torn off similarly to the horse's, but it was not so. Plen was being helped to his feet by the old farmer. The ape lay dead in front of him, its single eye full of arrows. He heard the thunder of hooves and looked up to see Queen Artremaya with her long bow out, having loosed the arrows that saved the farmer.

He nodded to her. She nodded back.

"My king!" Leonid shouted as he pulled back on the reins as he reached Rohan.

"We need to get down there with him!" Serxio cried. His horse reared back and Serxio brought it to an abrupt halt.

"Let's get the horses between the creatures and the king!" Leonid answered.

Both men had their crossbows out as they wheeled past him and then pulled hard on the horses' reins to stop their forward momentum. Even as their horses reared, bolts flew through the air as they shot at the crabs that had decided there wasn't enough meat on their downed brethren to feed them all.

The crabs had started scuttling towards him and the farmers, pincers opening and closing like hungry mouths. The bolts pierced the thin plates of armor around their mouths, but bounced off the tougher chitin on their backs. Rohan dove forward and thrust Lightbringer into the mouth of one of the crabs. Light suffused it before it blew apart.

"Stay behind us, your majesty!" Leonid requested.

"No, you two keep moving or they'll take you down!" Rohan ordered. "I can take care of myself!"

As if to prove it, he sent an arc of light towards three cat-like creatures who were prowling

towards his friends, ready to pounce. The horses whinnied and reared.

"Don't stay in one place!" Rohan warned them again.

"But we can't leave you! Oh, damn it to the hells!" Serxio leaped off of his horse and raced to Rohan's side, sending a bolt towards another ape that swung through the nearest trees.

"Damnit! What are you all doing? Fine! Fine! No combat on horseback!" Leonid growled and leaped from his horse.

Leonid, too, ran to Rohan's side and his two friends had their backs to him as they all three faced off against the coming horde. Both horses fled just in time as crabs chased after them, pincers snapping madly.

"You are both insane!" Rohan shook his head, but felt a swelling of affection and pride.

"We're not leaving you," Serxio insisted as he loaded another bolt.

"These creatures have to get through us to get to you, your majesty," Leonid grunted.

"I know, my friends. Let today not be that day," Rohan said.

Then the battle was truly on. Apes, crabs, cats and trees, plus many more creatures he could hardly define, let alone name, poured out of the Lupine Woods. Driven into a frenzy by Marikoth and the poisoned land, they came in unceasing waves.

It was best that Leonid and Serxio had ditched their horses when they had, as many of the horses, though bred for battle, reared and broke formation. Some dumped their riders. Others were overcome by the monsters. Queen Artremaya had to fling herself from her saddle as one of the apes leaped and grabbed the horse's neck, dragging it down to the earth. She managed to keep her feet and joined the three of them in a tight knot.

Bodies of the creatures were piled high around them. There would have been many more, but for Rohan disintegrating them with Lightbringer. Their blood nourished the earth. Whatever vegetables had grown there were squashed underfoot though. And this was but one small section of ground. The border with the Fae Empire stretched for *miles* and though the Guard raced down its length, they were only defending a small portion of it.

I need to do more! I must do more! I am the Heir to House Aeturnal! Give me strength! Give me the will to defend my people and my land! Give me the power to destroy my enemies!

But even as he thought that last bit, he knew these creatures were not truly his enemies. There was only one true enemy and he sat like a loathsome spider in Aymar, likely watching as Rirea was turned black with blood. Marikoth. Smiling. Laughing. Drinking wine and enjoying the drama of the moment, knowing he was *winning*…

Rohan lifted Lightbringer up into the air. The sword *blazed*. He sent a thread of power within it, feeding it more and more.

Protect my people. Destroy my enemies. I am the Heir of House Aeturnal! HEAR ME!

He brought it down and a wave of light left it, spreading out in all directions. The world became gold for a moment. As the air cleared, he staggered to one knee, chest heaving, arms shaking with the effort. The wave kept going on and on and on down the length of the land between the edge of the forest and the farms until the end of it was out of sight. Every creature within dozens of feet on either side of that wave disintegrated. Everyone had a moment to breathe and stare at the destruction he wrought.

Queen Artremaya put a hand on his heaving shoulder. "By the gods, Rohan, you have struck a mighty blow!"

But even as she spoke, more creatures–an unending wave of them–appeared from the forest, racing towards them, completely undeterred.

“But not enough,” Rohan gasped. “Not nearly enough.”

TOO MANY

Prince Finrael Ravenspar saw his father King Thalanil Ravenspar's face grow white. His father wavered and started to fall. Finn quickly grabbed a hold of him, bracing his father's much larger body against his own before he lowered him into one of the chairs that had been set up in the crypt.

"Father!" Finn cried as Thalanil shook as if with fever.

"What's wrong with him?" Ryleth asked.

"He may still be experiencing weakness from Marikoth's attack," Finn guessed, but he had no idea if that was right. "He said he was *fine*, but he's gone through so much."

Thalanil had lost his own father, his kingdom and his beloved wyvern Shadeheart. Not to mention that he had also been nearly drained to death by his own brother. While Rohan had given him his power back, all of that had only happened yesterday. Now there was the shock of this room–the crypt for the Aeturnal and Bonded One–plus all the rest of the information he had relayed to his father about the past and the future. That was enough to strain anyone on its own.

I should have been more careful with him regardless of what he said! Finn thought.

"Is there anything I can do?" Head Librarian Crosley asked as he fussed with his robes.

Crosley had been so eager to discuss the past with Thalanil, so overjoyed to speak to someone who had been alive when some of the brightest–and darkest–moments of history had occurred. Now, Crosley looked pale as the parchment that he pored over.

"Perhaps some water," Finn suggested as he crouched down by his father's side. He had no idea if water would do anything, but it would give Crosley something to do that would make him feel useful.

"Yes, yes, I think that the students have brought some down. I'll get him a cup." Crosley whipped around and was calling to his students to locate water, food or anything else that might be of use.

Being in the crypt of the last Aeturnal and Bonded One meant that they were far from the castle's kitchens though perhaps some clever student had brought some provisions with them. Finn cursed himself again for not ignoring his father's claims of health. Thalanil would have rather gnawed his arm off before admitting any weakness or hurt. His father did not believe he was safe here. He didn't think Finn was either, and so he played the role of powerful father and wise king. He was the only parent Finn had left and a wonderful, if prickly, person at that. He couldn't lose Thalanil.

He should be resting in bed, not down here in the dark!

Ryleth offered, "If need be, I can levitate him to get him upstairs so he won't have to walk there if he's too weak–"

"No!" It was Thalanil who spoke.

His father shook his head violently and half rose from the chair. Finn managed to keep him down in it, but just barely. His father was no longer shaking. His handsome face was filled with anger rather than shock as it had been just moments before. However, beads of sweat continued to dot his pale brow and his breathing was uneven as if he had run a race.

"Father, you're unwell! We need to get you upstairs and not have you further strain yourself to do it," Finn argued. "The shock of this place–"

"It's *not* that! The Wall–the Wall is gone!" his father cried.

More color was coming back to his face and his breathing started to even out. This time when he rose from his seat, Finn allowed him to stand on his own. There wasn't the slightest tremor. But was Thalanil obscuring his weakness?

But his next words had that thought flying away as his father said, "The power stones mostly fueled it, but I still kept a thin thread of magic attached to the Wall so I would know if there were any breaches."

Like when I stole life from the Empire, Finn thought. That act seemed like a lifetime ago.

"How could it be gone?" Ryleth asked, but then she grimaced, "Did Marikoth drain it?"

Finn could easily see the Death Mage gorging himself on the powerful magic that filled the power stones. Was his uncle so desperate already that he was feasting on whatever he could find?

"What else could drain all that power in an instant?" Thalanil responded. He wiped away the sweat from his brow with a steady hand. "He nearly had a hold of me again. That was why I almost swooned. I was able to disengage in time before he linked with me once more and took my life."

A cold finger trailed down Finn's spine and he was suddenly vibrating with tension. It wasn't just the fact that his father had nearly been his uncle's victim *again*, but that the Wall was gone. But why was he afraid of that?

Marikoth had already found a way to pass back and forth between Rirea and the Empire so the Wall hadn't truly protected them from him anyways. He could have come back here at any time. But taking down the *whole* Wall? Why would Marikoth do that? Merely to show them that he could? Or did it mean the Fae army was preparing to march on Rirea? They weren't ready! They weren't anywhere near ready!

The only chance of anyone surviving this is if I drain Marikoth. I know he'll have hostages, perhaps even people I know or care about. And he'll be ready for me. But he is afraid of me. And this may be the only chance we have!

"Father, I need to get upstairs to see what's happening," Finn explained as he rubbed his father's cold hands. "Ryleth, can you take care of him while–"

"Monsters!" Crosley's thin academic voice rang out in the crypt.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked over at him. He had a flask in one hand–likely filled with water–but the other hand was pointing upwards. Behind him was one of the Guards. The Guard raced past Crosley and skidded to a halt before Finn and Thalanil. He dropped to a knee.

"Your majesties and Mentor Ryleth! Monsters from the Empire are rioting through the kingdom! The Wall is gone! There is havoc! King Rohan has requested your assistance in protecting the land!" The Guard rushed out, sounding as if he had run all the way here.

"Where is King Rohan now?" Finn shot to his feet.

"He's already taken a horse and is out fighting them," the Guard gasped.

Finn closed his eyes for a second. Of course, Rohan was already out there, risking his life, to save his people.

"Then I will join him," Finn said without hesitation. "Ryleth, could you remain with my father–"

"No, Finrael, we must all join in this fight," his father said, his voice filled with strength and purpose. "I am recovered. I cut my connection to the Wall in time. It was just the shock of losing it and myself."

"But–"

"Prince Finrael, if the whole Wall is down then the entire border between Rirea and the Empire is exposed," Ryleth reminded him. "Not even you can handle that on your own."

Finn wondered if she was actually right. But the thought of draining and using so much magic was both exciting and sickening.

My hair would be totally white if I did that.

That was such a small vain thought to have in comparison to the terrible things that would happen if he did not use his gift, that he was ashamed of even thinking about it. He just did not like that it brought him any closer to being like Marikoth. But if he was truly Death's Chosen then he was immune from the worst aspects of using Death Magic.

"All right. Let's go!" Finn said.

As they were taking the stairs two at a time, he reached out to Silver Soul. Since they had spoken telepathically before, he was hoping that they didn't need to be near each other to communicate. And he was right.

Silver Soul! There's trouble! We need your help! Finn sent.

Ah? Trouble you say? That sounds more interesting than my fishing, as my belly is nearly full, she replied with great amusement.

You might save some room. The Wall is gone! Monsters are rampaging into Rirea!

Wall? You keep speaking of this Wall, but I have never seen it, Silver Soul grumbled.

I know, Silver Soul, just believe that for us it was there. The creatures in the Empire are invading Rirea because Marikoth has drained the magic that sustained it, he explained.

Marikoth! She spat the name. *It must be him that is riling the creatures in the Empire to invade. While some might wander into Rirea on their own, there is little here to recommend this land other than the sea,* she admitted.

He could be–be invading Rirea and the creatures are just fleeing his army, Finn theorized and his stomach flipped.

I sense no great massing of armies. Not yet. But war is coming. I can smell it in the air, Silver Soul told him.

Finn felt both relief and unease. The war was coming, but it wasn't here now. Maybe–his eyes drifted towards the back wall in the direction where the Dreadbrood slept–they would have time to prepare. If this was but a feint, Finn promised himself that he would take advantage of every moment from now on to prepare. No more avoiding the truth. No more ignoring what he truly was. As Death's Chosen, he had an army capable of defeating anyone, including a Death Mage. He would find a way to wield that power.

Can you assist us, Silver Soul? Your help would be invaluable, he said.

Meet me by the sea entrance to the catacombs where I first brought you. We four shall fly into battle together! She instructed.

Thank you, Silver Soul!

He had yet to repay her for the flight to Rirea from Aymar. She was a good friend. Truly, if there was something he could do for her, he'd do it without thought. He told Ryleth and his father about the plan.

"So we're going to ride a dragon?" Ryleth laughed.

"Wyvern, though she's big enough to be a dragon, I think," Finn confessed.

"That Silver Soul spoke to you and helped you…" Thalanil shook his head in wonder. "She never spoke to me. I wish she would have."

Silver Soul was Queen of the Wyverns and had been his grandmother's dear friend. After her death by Marikoth, Silver Soul had been inconsolable, attacking anyone who got too near her. She had become so dangerous that his father had contemplated killing her, because he feared that she would go after the populace. But Finn had reached her in his desperate need to get to Rirea and she no longer was full of rage, just old sorrow. He'd promised to repay her some day, but he still did not know how to or what she would want.

"You will speak with her now, Father, I'm certain of it," Finn said gently. "Come, the exit by the sea is this way!"

Using the light from Amarathar to guide their way, he led them through the catacombs, remembering that it had seemed a much longer distance when he had been coming the other way to get to Rohan. Now it appeared to take mere moments for them to reach the cavern with the beautiful mural above them. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw both Ryleth and his father gaze up at the mural.

"Incredible," Ryleth breathed.

"I knew that the Aeturnals had a connection to this land, that it was part of their Empire, but I had no idea how very embedded they were here," his father murmured. "In every block of stone, in every particle of sand, they are here."

Soon they did not need the light from his ring, as daylight flooded the end of the tunnel. They picked up the pace just as they felt the ground shake. Silver Soul had landed. Exiting the tunnel, Finn was blinded for a moment by sunlight. But soon his vision cleared and he saw the sleek, silver wyvern lowering her right forelimb so that they could easily climb up on her back. The sun gleamed on her scales. Water from the ocean–as she dove beneath the waves for fish–had cleaned them.

You look magnificent, Silver Soul! Finn praised her as he easily leaped up onto her back.

Flattery will get you everywhere, Prince Finrael! She chuckled.

Ryleth was next to clamber up. Like all Fae, she was sure on her feet, but she showed the appropriate amount of respect for the great wyvern queen who could have swallowed her whole without chewing.

"She is amazing, Prince Finrael," Ryleth laughed in wonder.

I like her! She shows the appropriate respect, Silver Soul mused.

"Silver Soul appreciates your kind words, Ryleth," Finn told her.

"I am glad. But I am only speaking the truth," Ryleth laughed again.

Now it was time for his father to climb up on Silver Soul's back, but he hesitated a moment, staring at her face with awe and great sadness. Finn was certain that he was thinking of his mother, the lost years he could have had with Silver Soul, and, of course, Shadeheart, who had given his very life force to protect Thalanil.

Silver Soul leaned down and rested her cheek against Thalanil. He grasped her head in his hands and shut his eyes. Finn knew that they were speaking, though he could not hear what they were saying to one another. After a moment, Thalanil's eyelids opened and a few tears tracked down his cheeks, but he was smiling. He said something in one of the Fae dialects, which despite Lord Gaelyn Camrys' best efforts, Finn had absorbed little to nothing of, to Silver Soul before he started to climb up to Silver Soul's back.

Ryleth interpreted it for him. "Queen of the Skies, I am but your humble servant."

"I think we all feel that way," Finn admitted.

Even as his father took his seat behind them, wiping away the tears, Silver Soul was already lifting off from the beach with powerful flaps of her wings. She rose up and up and up until they were above the tops of Reave Castle's towers and they could see to the forest beyond and the Empire beyond that, which was visible for the first time in nearly two decades.

"The Wall is truly gone," Finn said.

But whatever emotions the disappearance of the Wall was generating within him were overshadowed by what he saw then. The Lupine Woods were alive with creatures. He could see them moving like a black cloud through the ruined woods. He had never seen this many creatures together.

Bad magic, Silver Soul murmured. *Too many to eat. Too many to scare away.*

"By the gods, it is as if every creature in the entire forests of the Empire have emptied out and are coming here." Ryleth shook her head in shock.

"What has Marikoth done?" his father whispered.

And Finn could see that the influx of creatures went on and on and on. There was no way to drain and destroy all these creatures. He truly could not handle this himself. Even with Rohan, his father and Ryleth–all the magic users that he knew–there was simply no way to stop these creatures before they killed, maimed and destroyed what was left of Rirea.

Silver Soul, find Rohan! Take us to Rohan! Finn cried.

There was an impossibly bright line of light that flew down the border. He shielded his eyes, but he knew what it was and who had made it.

Rohan and Lightbringer!

I see him! Let us go! Silver Soul roared and flew like a speeding arrow to the spot where the wave of light had begun.

As they flew over the castle, they saw a massive figure in black armor on a black horse with gigantic hounds by his sides and more warriors following him on nearly as impressive war horses.

Tearlach!

The Achuvien king looked up as they passed overhead. He lifted his flaming sword above his head as if in tribute and then he was crashing into what looked like crabs the size of sheep. Finn lost sight of him. He was too busy scanning the ground for Rohan. He wasn't surprised when he located the Rirean king surrounded by the bodies of dead and dying creatures.

There! There he is, Silver Soul! Finn cried.

Rohan moved with lightning quick speed, swinging Lightbringer around him like a whirlwind. Finn saw Serxio and Leonid, back to back with Rohan, all using their weapons to take down creatures that leaped, scuttled and lunged. Serxio slapped Rohan's shoulder and pointed upwards towards them. He saw Rohan glance up as did Leonid. There were faint cries of happiness at their arrival, but then they were back in battle.

Silver Soul, we need to get down to Rohan. Can you do it?

Of course! We just need a clear spot, she answered.

"Silver Soul is taking us down," Finn told the others

"Ryleth and I will create a barrier large enough for Silver Soul to land, but the creatures inside of it are yours, my son," his father said.

Finn nodded. He saw Ryleth and his father clasp hands and begin to murmur a spell. Green light appeared in two spots about fifty feet across. A shield formed, encircling Rohan, Serxio and Leonid. Creatures bashed themselves against the shield, but none could get through. Yet, as his father had said, there were still many creatures within the shielded spot.

Finn settled himself. He breathed in and out. The sounds of battle that had been so jarring and

loud fell away until all he heard was the whisper of the wind. He stretched out his hands, sensing the life forces of all the creatures in the shielded zone. He saw the million strands of life waving at him. Saliva gushed into his mouth as if he were anticipating a fine meal.

Finn pushed the discomfort that he felt at that away. Now was not the time to reject who and what he was. He needed to accept this and use it for good. He could tell the creatures were too maddened to reach and control so there was only destruction for them. He drew the strands towards him.

He *pulled*.

Life flowed up into him like an unending river of cold, refreshing water. Everything inside of him tingled. He felt like laughing. The sun seemed brighter. The colors were more vibrant even though Rirea was a painting of browns and blacks these days. He saw all the variations of those dark colors and in them he found beauty. The air seemed to shimmer with possibilities.

He could do this forever…

"Finrael! FINRAEL!" His father touched his shoulder and Finn jerked, coming out of deep sleep.

"Wh-what?" Finn got out.

"You've destroyed them," his father said gently and gestured below.

"You've more than just destroyed them," Ryleth pointed out.

There were no creatures within the shielded area. Nor were there any in another fifty yard radius around it. The Guard were slowly turning around in confusion as the creatures they had been fighting were no longer there. Only shimmering ash shifted in the wind. Tearlach, his dogs and his men arrived with the thundering hooves of their war horses.

"You did not leave even one for me? Ach, Finrael, what is this game you play?" Tearlach shouted up, sounding amused and annoyed.

But Finn knew that this was only a partial reprieve. Farther up the border there were plenty of creatures coming through. But they had this moment. Finn urged Silver Soul to land. She did on what was now clear land. Finn slipped off of her back and threw himself into Rohan's arms.

The Rirean king was breathing hard and sweat coated his face. But Finn did not care. He kissed him fiercely over and over again. Then he was bringing Serxio and Leonid in for a hug.

"Are you all right?" Finn asked desperately.

"We are now. Good gods, your power, Finn!" Leonid shook his head. "It is something else!"

Feeling that power sparking inside of him, Finn poured it into Rohan before he even asked. Lightbringer's runes burned brighter. Rohan took his nearest hand and held it against his lips.

"Enough, dear heart," Rohan told him. "You must keep some for yourself."

"There's no need. There are so many creatures to drain," Finn admitted and his heart felt heavy saying it.

Rohan's lips pressed together in a thin line. "They're only behaving like this because Marikoth has maddened them. I hate that we have to kill them."

"They were already ill," Finn told him. "The creatures attacked Aymar for no reason before, remember?"

"I do." Rohan moved his hand through the white shock of hair that graced the front of Finn's head. "King Thalanial, it is good of you to come assist us."

His father, who had been observing them and their surroundings with the same grim look, answered, "I see Vudine serves the Heir well, though it can do so much more."

Rohan looked down upon the glowing blade. "I know. I feel it has so many more possibilities. But I do not know how to tap into them." His eyes lifted to Thalanil's face. "I could use a teacher."

But his father did not take the bait, "You need many things before you need a teacher from what I

can see."

"Hey! This is your brother's doing!" Serxio cried, going slightly red-faced. "He's the one that sent those creatures here!"

"I am well aware," Thalanil answered stiffly.

"Why is Marikoth doing this?" Finn asked. "Silver Soul does not sense any armies massing yet so he is not intending to invade at this time, but this is just as devastating."

Silver Soul regarded the forest and the creatures that were appearing at the edges of it again. The green shield would keep them out, but they had to engage again soon.

"Marikoth wants…" Rohan grimaced and looked away for a moment, "He will not stop sending the creatures until I agree to be bound to him."

"What?" Finn's voice was so thin and small that he hardly heard himself say it.

Shock coursed through him. Marikoth was using this attack to bargain for Rohan? Of course, he was. His uncle knew that every death would weigh on Rohan's shoulders. Not just his own people's demise, but the creatures, too. Finn suddenly wanted to be up in the sky again on Silver Soul's back. He would drain all the creatures. He would destroy all of them! Marikoth would not have Rohan! He would *never* have Rohan!

"You must not agree," his father's voice was like ice, mirroring Finn's own arctic determination.

Yet he was surprised by how definite his father was. He knew that Thalanil was not saying this because he knew Finn loved Rohan and couldn't bear to lose him. No, it was for something else entirely.

Rohan turned towards Thalanil with a touch of surprise. "I do not intend to. But I wonder if you wish me to remain unbound for the same reasons I do."

"My brother…" Thalanil swallowed some emotion then, whether it was anger or pain, Finn couldn't say. Maybe it was both. "My brother drained our father with *glee*."

Finn flinched as did Rohan at that description.

"He is a monster," Thalanil continued. "And if he gets what he wants, he will merely use it to continue his destruction, to increase its size, before he is consumed by the madness in him."

Rohan slowly nodded. "I agree. Nothing good can come of surrendering to him."

"Surrender? Who talks of surrender when we still have steel in our hands?" Tearlach asked as he trotted over on his warhorse Wraith.

The warhorse's red eyes–so like the Fae's in a way–stared at Thalanil with just as much dislike as Tearlach did. Thalanil turned to face the Achuvien king. He stared long and hard at him as if he were trying to place Tearlach's face.

Finally, Thalanil said, "Steel will not solve your problems here. Not even steel infused with magic… or bile."

Tearlach's longsword was lit with fire from one end to the other and the Achuvien king smiled–not a nice smile–at Thalanil.

"What do we do, Father? Do you have a plan?" Finn asked.

"We must restore the Wall," his father answered simply.

"But how? You said that Marikoth had drained the power stones!" Ryleth pointed out.

"But he," Thalanil pointed to Rohan who still held Finn tight to him, "can replenish them again with my son's help."

"Going from power stone to power stone would take too much time," Rohan protested.

But Thalanil shook his head. "No, there is a main node, an area that if you replenish it, it will send that power out to the other stones."

“But won’t Marikoth just drain the stones again even if you put up the Wall again?” Finn asked.

“I will have them on the Rirean side of the Wall this time and I will tune the magic so his little device won’t get through,” Thalanil explained. “Now the Wall won’t be keeping the people of Rirea out, but instead, protecting them against the Empire.”

“Where is this main node?” Rohan asked, brow smoothing out.

Thalanil pointed to the heart of the Lupine Woods. “It is a tree with leaves made of glass.”

Sexio let out a sharp laugh as he said, “So we’re going hunting for that damned tree again? Good grief, and I thought monster blood was all I would have to get out of these clothes.”

THE TREE WITH LEAVES OF GLASS

"A tree with leaves of glass?" Rohan lifted his right eyebrow even as his mouth tugged into a smile. "We've been searching for it for some time. I had begun to think that it was a myth. One of my uncle's boondoggles. But you say it's real, Thalanil? And that is where you anchored the Wall?"

Thalanil nodded. It irked him that Hugues had figured out that much. The man was still dangerous though just a mortal with not enough of the old blood to turn him into the Heir. He supposed, in some small way, he should be glad the Heir wasn't Hugues but Rohan instead.

They had undoubtedly been searching for the tree in order to cut it down and take the Wall down with it. That would be something Hugues would do. Destroy something marvelous in order to preserve his peasant kingdom. But the tree was not so easy to destroy and could not be harmed by mortal weapons in any event. Not even fire could burn it.

He worried slightly that Marikoth may have harmed it when taking down the Wall, but he doubted it. Marikoth wanted to re-establish the Empire. Harm the power network and he would harm the restoration. But would his brother realize that between himself, Rohan and Finrael they could restore the Wall? Perhaps.

"You know where it is, obviously?" Leonid asked him.

Another nod from Thalanil.

"And you're going to show us the way? Rohan wasn't lying that we've searched for ages and never found a thing," Serxio added with a shrug of his shoulders. "I really don't want to be fighting monsters in the forest forever while we look. It's hard enough fighting them out here where there's not as much mud."

The young lord looked down at his muddy, thigh-high suede boots with dismay.

"I must show you the way, because I doubt that Rohan can access the network of power stones unless he sees the main one," Thalanil said with a touch of disdain at this lack of ability. "Perhaps you will even have to *touch* it to fill it as you needed to in order to feed power into me, Rohan."

"I certainly was not touching you for any other reason, Thalanil," Rohan answered coolly.

"Father, Rohan is the only one who can power up the stones again. Please put your *issues* aside in this," Finrael begged.

"As you wish, Finrael."

He bowed his head slightly to the son he adored, but whose heart seemed to be wedded to another of his enemies. For was that not what the Heir was? A replacement for the Ravenspars? The Aeturnals returning to their rightful place as rules of the Empire? Luckily, Rohan was unskilled and untutored with whatever little magic he had. Unlike Marikoth, he was not a threat to Thalanil as he

was.

You act as if that is some personal weakness of his, Thalanil, to not know how to use his magic when there has not been another Aeturnal magic-user alive in ages, Silver Soul chided.

Thalanil tossed his head. *To not know how to use your own magic–*

He did not know he even had any magic until a short time ago, Silver Soul reminded him. She seemed to find his thoughts unworthy of him.

His mostly human blood obscured his power, he said. *That just shows–*

What does it show? Other than an Aeturnal–or more than one–fell in love with a human and had children with them… just like you did, Thalanil, Silver Soul interrupted, but gently.

His eyes went to his son. Finrael still stood in the circle of Rohan's arms. The Rirean king's arms were curled protectively around his son's slender waist while Finrael gazed up at Rohan with adoration in his green eyes.

Maeve's face flashed before him for a moment and his heart hurt with the memory of it. Had he looked at her in that same way? Yes, yes, he had. His soul shriveled slightly at the thought that despite all of the love he felt for her, he had not had the courage to marry her.

Even if I had offered, she would have said no once she realized Finrael had the ability to use Death Magic, Thalanil realized bleakly. *She knew what her fate would be and she accepted it. But I never could have. Yet now I cannot imagine life without Finrael. To have to choose between them would have been the cruelest thing ever.*

Your mother understood the impossibility of that choice for your father so she made it herself, Silver Soul sighed.

What? What do you mean?

Thalanil was stunned. His mother and father had denied the existence of Death Mages until Marikoth had *made* them believe. But now Silver Soul seemed to indicate that his mother had known all along.

She told me that she felt his pull on her life force from the first. A child, of course, does feed from his mother in her womb, but it was more than that, Silver Soul explained. *She could sense that her life force and Marikoth's were tied together from the moment of conception. Almost like a set of scales. At first, his side only caused hers to lower slightly, but as he grew and became more powerful he took more and more from her until there was nothing left.*

Why didn't she tell Father?

Because he would have been faced with an impossible choice: his wife or his son, she said. *So she could not share her burden with him.*

Why didn't she go to our learned Priests and Priestesses to find a solution other than her own death? His gaze slid to Ryleth, who was focused on strengthening the shield.

You already know the answer to that. Those that had any knowledge at all would have simply advocated Marikoth's death–

If only he had been killed!

He was not then what he is now. You know this. And maybe he wouldn't be who he is now if this all had been explained to him. But that is a foregone conclusion now.

Her voice was soft and he could not deny the truth of what she said. He had remembered his brother's goodness even in the face of finding him about to take the Empire from him.

She continued, *And anyone who knew more than that about Death Mages was exiled at best.*

It was foolish to obscure the past, he agreed.

More than foolish. Forbidding knowledge of history only makes it able to repeat itself, but in

the repetition, you will not even have the tools from your past to combat it.

She had more than a point.

So my mother knew she would die? His soul shook at this.

Yes. Do not think that she went easily or gladly into that good night. She looked for answers for Marikoth's sake, if not her own, Silver Soul sounded heavy with the weight of his mother's fruitless quest. *In the end, she found no solution other than to give her life to her son. She left a letter for your father, telling him not to punish Marikoth for what had happened. She had died for him to live after all.*

Thalanil's hands fisted. *And how did Marikoth repay her? Killed her husband. Attempted to kill me. And all the others he has drained of life to sustain his own since then. What about them?*

Again, she did not know how grim his tale would be. His bitterness and the magic has corrupted his once good heart, Silver Soul advised. *The boy he was is not the man he is now.*

He is a black hole. A monster with an endless desire for death.

And death was all around them here. The black trees. The drained land. He had not been in Rirea since Maeve's death and now the whole of this place was like a graveyard to him, literally and figuratively. But he was stuck here. His son was stuck here. And Finrael looked like he wanted to stay. Thalanil's soul shriveled more. His son was everything to him. Everything he had left.

Mortal love is poison, Thalanil said.

If Rohan had a skilled teacher I believe that the slowing of his blood could be increased and immortality reached easily. But there is no such teacher for him… is there? Silver Soul was staring at him now. Her ancient eyes were full of wisdom and meaning.

He rocketed back at her suggestion. She meant for *him* to teach Rohan his magic! For *him* to give Rohan eternity instead of getting rid of him after a few hundred years or less.

I will not help this man take my throne and my son! He snapped.

Thalanil, you've never wanted the throne, Silver Soul reminded him. *And you will lose your son if you keep on with this futile battle against the man he loves.*

He did not respond to her. The conversation had taken but a moment so the others had not noticed his inattention. His son had glanced over at him, but his conversation with Silver Soul was private. He felt a prickling of shame but thrust it away. He was doing what was *best* for Finrael. But helping reset the Wall was something that would help everyone.

"The tree is in that direction," Thalanil stated and pointed to the south-east.

"I imagine the power needed will be significant to restore the power stones and the Wall too," Ryleth murmured.

"That won't be a problem," Finrael answered her and there was a light in his eyes that told Thalanil the creatures' lives called to him.

But he does not look like Marikoth. Not yet, Thalanil worried.

Yet had his father not told him that there could be only one Death Mage at a time? And had his son not indicated that he was something else? Even Marikoth claimed Finrael was not like him. So what was his son? He had the power of a Death Mage. Did he also have the weaknesses of one? Or was he something altogether different?

"Silver Soul, can you fly Rohan, Father and me to the tree?" Finrael asked the great wyvern queen.

It will be easy to do. But we both must snack on the way, Finrael, yes? She laughed.

"So while you all go off doing something magical, we stay here and fight?" Serxio looked a little defeated at that.

The creatures were already coming out of the forest in droves again. Thalanil saw a dozen Wrisu with their many horns that looked like branches atop their scaled heads. Their heavy claws left deep indents in the dirt as they used them to walk as much as their back legs. There were hopping, fish-headed Gribrim half as tall as a man, but they could take down beings ten times their size with ease and scour them of flesh in less than an hour. There was the Vilera who looked like Fae women with long, flowing hair, but that hair was sentient and could pull her prey to her fang-filled mouth in seconds and end a life. Truly Marikoth had gone to the darkest spots in the Empire and sent her most dreaded predators into Rirea.

"No," Finrael said. "I want you to get all the fighters into this shielded space. Keep them safe while we address the Wall."

Finrael's gaze swept to the corpses of what could only be farmers and other civilians. There were some leather armored Guards in the mix of the dead, too. But not as many. Not yet.

"But what about the people?" Leonid asked. "We can't simply let them march on!"

"No, of course not. We will be at the tree in moments, Leonid, and I promise you, I will make sure that no creatures will get close enough to hurt anyone in Rirea," his son answered.

"Little one, I have no intention of hiding inside a pretty bubble when there are things to kill," Tearlach scoffed and shifted his flaming sword. "I have not had such sport since I came here. I will not be deprived. Besides, even after you put up your little Wall, the creatures on this side of it will still be here and must be dealt with."

Finrael's green eyes glowed. "None will survive me."

Silence fell at Finrael's words. Thalanil's gaze darted from one person to the next. Everyone believed him.

My son, what a grave and dreadful power you have.

"Well, I will have my fun while I can then!" Tearlach laughed. "Before the Little One comes and brings death and destruction down upon the land!"

"Don't get killed yourself," Finrael told him with a surprisingly easy smile at Tearlach. "We are becoming friends after all. I would not want to have all that effort with you go to waste."

Tearlach stared at Finrael with no expression on his face–perhaps he was stunned by his son's words–but then he broke out in a grin and slapped his armored thigh. "Indeed! I still owe you a translation!"

"You do at that," Finrael said, then went to Silver Soul and leaped upon her back.

Rohan gestured for Thalanil to go next and then he followed. Silver Soul lifted off from the ground with another powerful rush of her wings. The three of them caused her no extra effort whatsoever. Thalanil sent the tree's location to the wyvern. Not that he needed to. She already knew where it was.

And you say a Wall extended from there? She asked, sounding amused.

You are too powerful for even such great magic to affect you, he reminded her. *So it does not even exist for you.*

But it will exist for these poor, driven creatures, she sighed. *Look at Rohan's face. He feels the wrongness of it too.*

Thalanil reluctantly looked over at the Rirean king. Rohan was staring down at the creatures that whooped and roared and raced through the ruined forest. His expression was grim. His lips were set in a thin line.

"Rohan, you've been able to fill Lightbringer without touching it. Perhaps we can do the same with this tree?" Finrael suggested. "I can clear the surrounding creatures from around this tree with

little difficulty, but already I feel my reservoir is nearly full. I will need to release the power to you, but you will eventually need to release the power, too. We need to be near the tree to make sure it goes where it should."

Rohan let out a huff that could just barely be heard over the wind. "We are a pair, aren't we? You can drain life easily and refill your power with a snap of fingers, but I, who has a vast reservoir, seem to refill mine at a snail's pace at best."

"That's why we work together!" Finrael beamed at Rohan over his shoulder. "Ah, the tree! I see it!"

The mist that rose from the forest cleared and revealed the tree.

Rohan craned his neck. "Now I know why we didn't find it despite its size."

"It's in the Remnant," Finrael whispered.

"The Remnant?" Thalanil asked as he shifted his weight forward to look at the tree and its surroundings.

"It's a hollow where we think a lot of the wolves go and become twisted. No one travels there anymore," Finrael explained.

"I saw no sign of… oh…" Thalanil broke off.

The tree was as massive as he remembered. Its trunk was fifty feet wide and its branches were as large as some ancient tree trunks. They wound around one another like lover's arms as they sought the sky. But despite it being full summer, the tree's leaves were few and far between. The faint tinkle they made when blown against one another was nearly nonexistent. And there was a creeping blackness streaming up the trunk.

Thalanil let out an involuntary gasp. "It did not look like this when I raised the Wall."

"Have you not noticed how the rest of Rirea no longer looks as it once did?" Rohan asked bitterly.

"This is the first time he has left the castle, Rohan. Things have been restored there," Finrael pointed out. "But do look, Father. This is what the Wall allowed you to ignore. Rirea is dying, poisoned, rotten. Even with Rohan and me restoring some of the land, this cannot be stopped altogether from happening and it is already spreading to Bolan and Sultane. It can only be restored if the Empire is restored and–"

"And an Aeturnal and his Bonded One rule again," Thalanil finished for his son.

He really looked at the forest. It was not healthy. Unhealthy was a *mild* way to describe it. The trunks were black and weeping poison. The ground looked like grave matter to him. There were no flowers or plants. Everything was black and gray. This was not the Rirea he had left. The decay was inconceivable in the relatively short decades he had not been here.

"Even the poor creatures Marikoth has sent here to attack us are twisting more and more the longer they remain in Rirea," Rohan sighed.

"No, they were already mad. Finrael has white in his hair because this imbalance is in the Empire too," Thalanil whispered.

This cannot continue, Thalanil, Silver Soul said. *You know this. And if the only way is for you to train Rohan to use his magic and give him your throne, is it not worth it?*

I…

Thalanil, could a person who knows the solution to this wrongness, but refuses to accept it–even stands in the way of that solution–be a good king? Be a worthy king? Silver Soul pushed.

He knew what the answer to those questions was: *No.* Yet he couldn't fully let go of his objections to the Rirean king. Surely those had merit!

But Rohan is human! Thalanil decried, then added the modifier, *Mostly…*

Yes, and he is all that is good in humanity, which you used to see whenever you gazed into Maeve's eyes.

He is not Maeve! She was–she was wise beyond her years! She understood responsibilities that span more than one human lifetime though she did not get to live even that much, he protested.

I know we like to think the ones we love are unique. But I have studied Rohan. I have seen the contents of his heart. If you looked yourself, you would see what I do, Silver Soul responded. *You would see what your son does. But you purposefully look away as you did at this land. You cannot deny what you now see, Thalanil.*

The wretchedness of the once beautiful and lush Lupine Woods was impossible not to see now. Every memory he had of picnicking under the bows of those trees pricked at him. Where there had once been sun-dappled grass and thickly-leafed trees was devastation. It was the living embodiment of the corruption in Marikoth. But he did not think that defeating Marikoth would end this horror. Marikoth was just another victim of whatever was doing this. And it couldn't stand.

Rohan is untrained and quick like all who are born mortal–

So train him! Teach him how to think like an immortal! Silver Soul chastened. *He can learn. Be his teacher, Thalanil. Be responsible for the restoration of the Empire. Do you think there is only value in such an act if you sit upon the throne?*

No, he whispered.

You are greater than this, Thalanil. Embrace the better part of yourself and help Rohan, Silver Soul advised.

Thalanil closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he focused on the Rirean king. Rohan tilted his head to the side, surprised likely by the lack of hostility in his expression.

"Finrael, we must get down there. We cannot do this on Silver Soul's back," he said to his son. "I will help guide Rohan in fueling the stones, but I also wish him to see how I conjure the Wall. So that he… that he might begin to *learn* how magic works."

"You're going to teach me some magic?" Rohan blinked.

"Not just *some*," Thalanil corrected. "I'm going to teach you everything I possibly can from now on."

And a weight he had not known he had been carrying left his shoulders.

THE REMNANT

There is no place for me to land here! Silver Soul informed Finn as she circled above the Remnant. *The trees are too tightly packed together and there is that ruined tower in the way!*

The tower should have been obscured by the forest's canopy as it was high summer, but all the limbs of the trees, including the tree with leaves of glass, were mostly bare of foliage and it stuck out like a rotten tooth.

The tower was built from black stone laced through with red, not the pure white stone of Aymar or Reave Castle. And unlike the Aeturnal's architecture, which had graceful arches and rounded corners, the half-sunken, crumbling tower was sharp and all angles. It reminded Finn of a sword with the blade thrust brutally into the earth leaving only the hilt exposed. Yet it called to him nonetheless.

Who built it? What was it for? It reminds me of a watchtower. But watching for what?

Finn opened his mouth to ask about the tower when his father spoke, "Time is in flux here. Currents from both the Empire and Rirea cross over each other the nearer to the tree we are. The tree itself marks the dividing line between my–between *the* Empire and Rirea. It bisects the tree actually."

"What is the practical effect of this time flux?" Rohan asked.

"If you accidentally step into a time current linked to the Empire, to those of us still in Rirean time you will appear to have stopped nearly dead in your tracks. You must avoid those currents or we will have to wait an hour or more for you to take a step and get free of the time distortion," his father cautioned.

"How will we know which currents are which?" Finn asked.

"Throw some of these ahead of you." His father dug into one of his pockets and gave them both little pouches with glittering crystals inside. "If the crystals fall to the ground, you're fine to move forward, but if they hang in the air, don't go that way."

Rohan tossed the pouch up and caught it easily. "Sound advice."

"Silver Soul cannot land anywhere near the tree. The last landing place that was any good was half a mile back," Finn broke the bad news.

"We cannot afford the time to go back and walk here. We must move as quickly as possible," his father said. "Marikoth might not have considered us putting up the Wall again as a defense, but he will figure it out soon enough. He'll have seen Silver Soul headed here. The time difference will give us some amount of protection, but it will take time to fill the stones and then for me to create the Wall again."

"This time with the stones and the tree on *this* side of the Wall," Rohan said with some

satisfaction.

"If Marikoth comes after us, I will deal with him," Finn said, even as his stomach clenched in both fear and awful anticipation.

He remembered all too well the glory of draining Marikoth. It had felt so much more satisfying than draining the creatures or the overgrowth. Like fine wine compared to sour ale. His mouth flooded with saliva at the thought. He wondered when they got the Wall up if he could still reach beyond it to Marikoth and drain him. If he was in eyeshot, Finn thought he could. Maybe. But he might weaken the Wall in the process and he couldn't risk that.

But if I end him then all of this is over and there need be no Wall ever again, Finn thought.

Yet he wasn't confident that he could drain Marikoth down to nothing that way or any way. His uncle was clever and ages better at using Death Magic than he was. His father was, thankfully, willing to train Rohan, but who would train him? There was no one. He pushed that to the side. Perhaps he didn't need training. He was Death's Chosen after all. Perhaps all he needed was brute strength against his uncle. Death Magic was his birthright while it was stolen power in Marikoth's hands. He only wished he believed that.

"There should be no need to fight him. We will see him coming from a long way off," his father said.

"Unless he encounters a Rirean time current," Rohan pointed out. "Then he could be upon us in moments."

Grimness filled all of their faces at that thought.

"Silver Soul will hover over there. She'll get as low as possible." His father indicated an area between the tower and the tree with leaves made of glass that was relatively open. "We can jump down from her back."

"That's an awfully long way down if she stays above the treetops," Rohan pointed out.

"I will slow our descent to the ground with a spell that thickens the air. The last thing we need is for someone to break a leg," Thalanil answered, then he sharpened his gaze upon Rohan. "You will watch everything I do. I will be asking you about it later."

Rohan nodded. "I will observe your every move, Thalanil. I truly do wish to learn and be a good student."

"You are very *human* so we shall see how easy or difficult it is for you," Thalanil stated. Seeing Finn's look of dismay, he added, "That is not a criticism, Finrael. It is a fact. Magic and humans rarely mix."

"You likely would have said that about alchemy, too, until you met Christopher," Finn pointed out.

"Yes, he is quite gifted, which he supplements with extreme hard work," his father admitted.

"You don't know the half of it. He barely sleeps in his room and can't be bothered to eat. If Serxio weren't practically hand-feeding him, he'd waste away to nothing," Rohan muttered.

"I should hope to have such a dedicated student in *you*, Rohan," his father said lightly.

Rohan gave Finn a small smile. Finn patted his back. His father would be a hard and demanding teacher. But he knew that Rohan would be up to the task. His beloved was, above all things, dedicated to whatever he had to do to protect his people. Learning magic was necessary to do that, so it would be done.

"When we've restored the Wall, we'll have to walk out of the Remnant unless you can lift us up, Father," Finn said as Silver Soul had swept around in a wide arc to get even with the area they were to jump off from..

"You make it sound so easy, Finn," Rohan laughed uncomfortably.

"It *is* easy," Thalanil said.

"In comparison to what?" Rohan asked slightly sharply.

"To everything else you will have to do with magic. You just need to feed the power stone like you do the sword or me. No different, Rohan. And Finrael will have to keep the power coming," his father said as he gazed down. "I don't see much life down there, but once we're on the ground, the creatures will likely come, seeing us as an easy meal."

"It's strange they aren't breaking through here now," Rohan muttered.

"Even if they don't come, I was able to drain life from the Empire before even with the Wall up. I can do it now with it down," Finn said.

"We're lucky that Marikoth cannot do that. Not that there is much to drain here as Thalanil said," Rohan said.

His father's gaze flickered towards the Empire. "I do not yet know how reconnected Marikoth is to the imperial lands, but I know he used to be able to tell where every leaf would fall."

"Meaning if I pull power from the Empire, he'll definitely know we're here?" Finn realized and grimaced.

"Yes. The longer it takes him to realize what we're doing, the better," his father said.

"Your guards were able to find exactly where I had taken life," Finn sighed. "So draining from imperial lands is a no go." He rubbed his forehead between his fingers. "Well, Rohan and I are not going to make love out here."

His father made a choking sound.

Rohan chuckled. "No, we didn't think ahead to have Serxio set up a tent."

"All right. Time to fall. Let's do this all together," Thalanil cut off further conversation about their lovemaking.

Finn couldn't quite blame him. It wasn't exactly comfortable for him to know his father was aware of every single time he and Rohan made love in the castle. And not just him. *Everyone* knew. But having his father know definitely felt different.

Silver Soul skimmed over the top of the trees until she slowed to a stop in midair, flapping her wings more vigorously to keep them in place. They were still over fifty feet above the ground. Without Thalanil's help, they would not have been able to survive this fall.

"On three," Rohan said.

"One," Finn counted.

"Two," Thalanil added.

"Three," Rohan ended.

The three of them jumped off of Silver Soul's back, but instead of plummeting straight down they hovered on either side of the wyvern before they slowly began to drop as if the air was thick as molasses. They touched down in moments. Finn cast one last look up at the wyvern.

I will be nearby! She informed him. *I do not wish to be a pushpin in a map for Marikoth to find you.*

Thank you, Silver Soul! Again, I do not know how we will repay you, Finn told her.

Restore the Wall then restore the Empire, she said. *That will be enough.*

Finn felt like Rohan had when he'd inadvertently made it seem as if restoring the power stones and putting up the Wall would be a snap.

"Come, the power stone is at the base of the tree," Thalanil informed them as he lightly strode up the slight hill to the tree. He cast some of the crystals ahead of him, but they all harmlessly fell to the ground and rolled away. So there were no time currents from the Empire this far from the tree. "The

tree has grown around it. The power stone is sunk into its very roots. This is important because…"

His father's voice faded from Finn's mind as he heard a high-pitched ringing in his ears. It was a tinny sound. Insistent. Then it faded, too. And, in its place, he heard what could only be described as the beating of a heart. He turned his head towards where it came from.

The tower.

The tower was tilted by several degrees. It did not stand upright, because the left side of it had sunk quite a few feet into the earth. The three broad steps leading up to it were broken too at the same location where the tower tilted. Finn realized that the tilting must have been violent and happened all at once instead of occurring over long years. Something had hit the tower, nearly toppling it over, but not quite.

The doors to the tower were long rotted away. He could see only blackness inside, mirroring the stone that made up its structure. Nothing about it was welcoming. It was clearly menacing. And yet, Finn had taken a few steps towards it without realizing he had done so. Only Rohan's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"Finn, where are you going? The tree is this way," Rohan said.

Finn's hearing popped back in the moment that Rohan touched him. He jerked and stared at the Rirean king, confused at first why he was being disturbed for a *tree* when the *tower* was so much more important than–

"Rohan, I'm sorry." Finn rubbed his forehead. "I don't know what's come over me. The tower–"

"The Remnant," Rohan nodded, scowling.

"Ah, that's how it got its name!" Finn realized, not understanding until then why this part of the forest was separated from the rest.. "The tower–"

"Is the remnant of some ancient civilization. Not Aeturnal, I don't think." Rohan continued to scowl up at the tower.

"Who do you think built it? And why?" Finn asked, still feeling the pull of that black interior.

"There are no records. At least, none that I've found. Maybe there will be an explanation in the crypt's library." Rohan shrugged, shaking himself as he pulled his gaze from the tower. "Thankfully, the tower is all that is left of whoever built it. It has an evil look. I would not like to find who made it."

Finn thought of the Dreadbrood. There was something *similar* between the tower and the undead army. Perhaps the tower wasn't the *only* remnant. Maybe the two things were connected somehow. But his thoughts scattered as his father impatiently called them. Thalanil was already at the base of the tree. He was clearing away debris from what looked like a piece of opaque glass.

Finn and Rohan followed in his footsteps as those were safe from time currents. He felt and saw nothing to indicate that there was anything wrong with time there until they neared the tree. Then he saw currents of air that held twigs or dead leaves within them, seemingly frozen in place, like insects in amber. His gaze followed them into the Empire.

He had never seen the Empire this way. Before, there had always been the green Wall of seeming glass. It distorted what could be seen beyond it, but now, Finn could see how the forest changed from Rirea to imperial land and how things did *not* change.

In the Empire, he had been overwhelmed with the huge lighted mushrooms and the thick vines that crept everywhere, obscuring the trunks of the trees even. But now that he was able to compare the trees in the Lupine Woods and those in the Empire, he realized that they were the same. Well, *mostly* the same or they would have been the same. The ones in the Empire were huge, engorged on life, covered in thick, pulsating vines that even now seemed to be questing towards them. The ones in

Rirea were sucked dry. Thin and brittle, swollen only with poison and pus. But they *were* the same type of trees.

The Empire had magical glowing mushrooms of unusual size. There was nothing like that in the Lupine Woods. Or was there? Finn realized that they *did* have glowing mushrooms, only they were small, barely as large as his thumbnail, but they did glow softly as they ate the rotted wood. There were few of them. But there were few living things in general in Rirea.

I can see how it must have been and will be if the Empire is restored. There will be mushrooms here, too, and the golden-barked trees will stand tall and graceful, Finn realized.

"Do you feel anything from the stone, Rohan?" Thalanil asked, refocusing Finn on the tree with leaves of glass and the stone wrapped within its roots.

Finn could tell from the way his father rocked from foot to foot then forced himself to still that he was anxious about Marikoth appearing. But he clearly wanted this to be a teaching experience too.

Rohan's gaze became unfocused as he stared at the power stone. It was much larger than the one that Finn had seen in Tradavor. He wondered if Samron was still alive and if the gates of Tradavor still held. He doubted it. The worthy destruction of Hex and her brood had allowed, in part, Marikoth to send his army of monsters to Rirea.

"I feel… an emptiness that I can fill," Rohan said, his voice sounding distant, remote, as if he were standing at the bottom of a deep well. "Finn, help me."

"Of course."

Finn allowed a trickle of his stored power into Rohan. He sensed it pooling into the stone, but he felt no *bottom* as if the stone contained an oceanic vastness.

How will we fill this? And it's only one stone! Why can't the monsters be attacking?

"Good, that is good. Do you feel something beyond this initial emptiness? Connections to other voids? If you don't yet, let your senses sink farther," Thalanil suggested. "If the stones are indeed connected, there will be magical paths between them that your spirit may walk."

Rohan nodded. He shut his eyes and reached physically for the stone. His fingertips rested upon its smooth surface. Finn's eyes widened as he saw a gold glow directly underneath Rohan's fingers. That glow sank deep within the stone until he could not see it at all any longer. He thought he saw a flash out of the corner of his eyes as if a lightmote had danced past them. Finn stretched his senses out and he could feel another warm spark that felt of Rohan's energy not far from them.

Another power stone!

And there was another and another. So many of them. Finn already felt the power inside of him stretching as Rohan fed it into the network of stones. They need an ocean of power to completely fill them.

"There are so many of them. So many voids. Like stars. Faint. Some fainter. But they call to me. I can make them *burn*," Rohan murmured.

"With Finrael's help," his father said with a faint smile. He turned to look at Finn. "Give him more power, Finrael."

"I've given him all the excess I have already. He has used it all," Finn said. "I need more life."

Finn cast around them then. His father's observation that there was little life here was spot on. He looked with his eyes as well as his power. All the surrounding trees were blackened and dead or nearly so. He saw no waving blue filaments to gather in his hands and pull to him. There was no grass, only mud and stones. There were not even any monsters nearby. They seemed to be continuing to skirt the Remnant despite the three of them being there..

"I have to go further afield to find something to drain," Finn said. "I should be able to stay

connected to Rohan as I do, but–"

"I will go with you, Finrael–"

"No, Father, I need you to stay with Rohan and warn us both if Marikoth appears," Finn said. "I will be fine. I literally need to find enemies and I must drain every one."

Thalanil nodded. "Do not go too far if you can help it."

"I will only go as far as I must," Finn promised.

The last thing he wanted to do was to be away from the other two men this close to the Empire.

Rohan's eyes remained shut, but he said, "I feel you, Finn. We fight together."

"We do." Finn kissed his cheek. "But use your power only to fill the stones."

Finn turned on his heel and started striding towards the western edge of the Remnant where he felt more life than here.

"Remember to throw the crystals, Finrael! The time currents are everywhere," his father warned.

Finn waved his thanks and took out his pouch. He tossed one crystal after another ahead of him. He nearly walked straight into a time current but his crystal froze in place. Stuck. He sidled to the right and threw another crystal. It stuck in the air too. One more sidle and another crystal thrown and he was able to strike forward once more.

The tower was to his left. He felt it as if he were a magnet and it was a lodestone. He refused to look directly at it, telling himself that it was a distraction he did not need. He also told himself that he should be out of eyeshot in a moment and–

Finn jerked to a halt. He had been walking into the woods, towards the Remnant's edge, but now he was on the top step of the tower, just outside the entrance! A cold wind blew out from inside scented with the tang of old blood.

Finn's heart was in his throat, stunned and shocked, that somehow he had gone from seeing dead trees ahead of him to this yawning entrance. What had happened? It was clearly some kind of magic.

One I don't have time for now. I need life and there's none here!

He could still feel the thin line of magic connecting him and Rohan, thankfully, though he wondered why Rohan or his father had not called out to him to ask him why he was going inside of the tower.

Father is watching for Marikoth. He's not observing where I go. And Rohan is concentrating on the power stone network. Yet why does that not make me feel better?

Another cold breeze issued from the tower's depths. Finn found himself leaning forward towards the doorway. It was so dark there. No sunlight got beyond the threshold, which was exceedingly odd.

It's magic! That's why! Nothing odd about that!

He pulled himself forcefully back. He needed to get to the edge of the Remnant where the monsters were. He needed to drain them to fuel the power stones. His will had to be stronger than this old magic! He thought of calling his father and Rohan for help, but he found himself unable to do so. It didn't matter. He had to get away from the tower. No matter what.

Finn shut his eyes. Not seeing the beckoning interior helped him break its hold on him. He resolutely turned on his heel. He took a step forward, expecting to feel a step below him, but his foot came down short. His eyelids flew open. He hadn't turned around. He had stepped *inside* of the tower.

Every part of him inside the tower's entrance had disappeared from view. He pulled his foot back and it reappeared. He slid it forward again and it disappeared. The blackness wasn't an absence of light, but some kind of magical curtain. He couldn't see past it unless he stuck his head inside.

I am not doing that!

He had heard so many things about the Remnant since he was a child, not the least of which was that the wolves came here and went mad. What if they went into this tower and were changed? If he did so, would he be changed, too? Crazed and poisoned?

I am not going inside of there! I am not! I have to–

Something caught Finn's ankle that was *inside* of the threshold still. Despite his intention to move back, despite his desire to run, he was still standing there, partially beyond the curtain of night. That something *tugged*. Finn's feet slid out from underneath him. He tried to let out a cry, but it was swallowed by the curtain of night as he was pulled through to what was beyond.

THE NECROMANCER

Finn found himself sprawled out on a stone floor. He was almost certain that he was still in the tower, but it was not dark inside. There were chunky white crystals set into holders on the walls casting an eerie blue-white brilliance all around him. Not that there was much to see. Certainly nothing that had grabbed him and *pulled*. For some reason, he imagined a giant raven's foot had clenched around his ankle to bring him here.

It could be the raven. I would like it to be. Then this isn't some bizarre trap I've fallen into and I'm meant to be here.

He grasped hold of the top of a wooden chest that was tucked near a staircase that wound along the curve of the tower's wall. There were other bound boxes and chests sitting neatly in rows, ready to be brought upstairs and unpacked. The chunky crystals continued up the stairwell, but he could also see the golden light of a fire streaming down from the floor above.

This can't be, Finn thought. *The tower is abandoned. We would have seen light coming out even from the thin windows, but there was none.*

More than that, the tower was not tilting any longer either. It stood straight and tall.

What is going on here?

Finn rubbed the back of his neck. His head throbbed as if he had an incipient headache. He slowly turned in a circle, expecting to see the blackness of the doorway again. Except there was a very solid door there now.

Lights on. Belongings here. Door is back. Tower not tilting, Finn considered these things long and hard. His hand closed around the pouch of crystals and it all came together. *This has to be the past!*

Finn's head throbbed again at that conclusion. Could he really be in the far past when this tower was new or, at least, not broken? The time difference between the current Empire and Rirea had always been considered strange. A magical artifice. Something the Fae had done to enhance the remainder of the Empire. Perhaps that was true, but maybe there were more time currents here than just the Rirean and current imperial time. Maybe he'd been caught in one that sent him much farther back in time.

But how much farther? It doesn't matter. I cannot be here! Rohan and Father need me. Marikoth could discover them at any minute. I must get back to my time!

Finn stumbled towards the door. His head throbbed worse with every step he took. When he touched the handle there was a stabbing sensation in his mind like a dagger had been thrust through his left eyeball and wiggled around inside his skull. He clutched his head and staggered back a few steps until the pain receded to a dull roar.

What is going on here?

He heard a *creak* coming from above him. His head shot towards the sound. Pain bloomed in his skull. He grimaced, but didn't look away from the staircase. He could see a shadow crossing before the golden light.

A person?

Was someone in the tower with him? Finn opened his mouth to call out, but he realized how foolish that was. Hadn't Rohan said the tower looked evil to him? That he wouldn't want to meet its builders? What if the person above was one of them?

Finn glanced back at the door to the tower. His head throbbed as if in warning. If he tried to get out again it would explode like an overripe melon. He grimaced. He had to get back!

And yet… Perhaps he was here for a purpose. He'd been drawn to the tower from the first. He'd been pulled inside. Maybe all of this was connected to the Dreadbrood. Perhaps it was connected to him…

I may not be here by accident, Finn realized. *I might be meant to be here. So that means I need to find out whatever I'm supposed to and then I'll be released.*

He wasn't at all sure that this was true, but it felt true. And what did he have to lose? There was simply no way he could get through that door. Besides, all it might lead him to was the outside of the tower in *this* time rather than his own.

So upstairs it is.

Finn crept up the curving staircase, keeping his body as close to the outside of the tower as he could. His boots made no sound against the smooth stone stairs as he reached a spot where he could see part of the floor above. He stopped and listened carefully. Did he hear the raspy turn of pages in a book? Or the gentle *clink* of a wine glass being set on a table? Was there a soft intake of breath? He could have just sent his magical senses out, but it felt unwise. Better to keep himself small and tightly tucked in. If he needed to use his powers, they were there.

"Why are you lingering on the steps?" A deep male voice with an Achuvien accent called down to him.

Finn stiffened. He was strong. He was damned powerful. Whoever–or whatever–this was, he could handle it. He resolutely walked up those last steps. The second floor had a fireplace as he'd assumed. The walls were lined with books and scrolls. They glowed in different colors.

Magic.

They were written in a familiar language. Not one that Finn could read. It was ancient Achuvien, he realized, having seen it in the crypt back in Rirea. Besides the walls of floor-to-ceiling bookcases, there were two chairs and a low table before the fire. Just as he had imagined, there was a man sitting in one of the chairs with a book on his lap and a wine glass on the table. What he'd missed was the large, silent hound that sat on the ground beside the chair. It did not stir at his approach.

"You still linger," the man sounded exasperated. "Come here. I refuse to crane my neck to look at you."

One of his large, pale hands waved gracefully for Finn to come. This was not a Fae hand. It was large and looked well used. A soldier's hand despite the books and other signs of academia around them. He could not see the man's face, but the voice…

"Tearlach?" Finn asked as he crossed over to the front of the chairs.

Except this man was older, much older, than the Achuvian king he knew. While Tearlach appeared ageless, it was also clear that he was in the prime of his life. This was an old soldier. His skin was that same chalk white as Tearlach's, but his hair was thinner and wispy over his skull. His eyes were

covered with white cataracts so thick that the pale blue color was completely obscured as were his black pupils.

"Is that my name in your age?" The Achuvien king asked. "Tearlach. A good name. A strong name. It means *raven* in Achuvien."

"Raven?" Finn let out a soft laugh. "Of course, it does."

"Sit. Sit. Have some wine," he said and gestured to the empty chair beside him. "It's been a long time since I've had visitors, but I still remember some of my manners."

He was still a massive man, but more shrunken than Tearlach. He wore all black, but instead of armor, these were robes. A red blanket covered his knees. It was a startling blood red compared to the rest of him. Finn perched on the other chair, determining that he did not want to be rude–at least not yet–but he also wanted to be ready.

"Why am I here?" Finn asked. "And how do you know who I am?"

"You clearly know me so why should I not know you?" A dry smile and faint wheeze was added to this response. "Yet I am simplifying things. I know who you are, but not *who* you are."

"You've lost me." Finn smiled that time.

"I know you are Death's Chosen." The way he said Finn's title was with both respect and bitterness. "But I do not know *who*," he paused and gestured to Finn's form, "you are. Yet it doesn't really matter. For being Death's Chosen is the reason you are here at all. It is the only thing that matters about you."

Finn bristled at that. His magic was just a part of him. An inconvenient part at times. A necessary part at others. But it certainly did not define the whole of him. But it was something Tearlach would say.

"And who are you if not Tearlach?" Finn asked.

"Not Tearlach *yet*."

"Is he you reincarnated?" Finn guessed.

The old man nodded. Finn thought of the Aeturnal king and his Bonded One. They had even looked like Finn and Rohan. Why shouldn't Tearlach, a great, if blunt, ruler be reincarnated, too?

But who is this person that he is a reincarnation of? Finn wondered.

"So who are you *now*?" Finn asked, realizing that this must be the right question to ask.

"I am your *general*," the old man answered, and that, too, was said bitterly.

Finn's mind immediately went to the story that Tearlach had told him about the Necromancer adopted by the God of Death who sought to go against the Fae and conquer the Empire. He had stolen control of the Dreadbrood and marched upon the Fae, but he was destined to fail as he was not the true leader of Death's Army.

I am.

"But you're not…" Finn paused and wrestled to put this together. "In my time, you are Tearlach. You don't even believe in any of this. You think the Dreadbrood is a myth and the Necromancer is a fairytale. Nothing more."

The Necromancer suddenly leaned towards him. Finn almost pulled back in a sort of revulsion. This being was not alive. This was a corpse he was looking at, or rather that was looking at him. The skin was so white because it was bone. The eyes were just glowing white lights inside an empty brain pan. The sweet scent of death wafted between his teeth.

"But we know better. Don't we?" The Necromancer whispered with a cruel smile.

"Yes, I've found the Dreadbrood. It is underneath Rirea–"

"Where I left it for you presumably. Safely tucked away." The Necromancer settled back in his

chair, looking like an old man again.

Finn's hands tightened on the brocade material of the arm of his chair. It felt old underneath his fingertips. Soft and rotten. He was certain that if he looked down he would see the wormholes, but if he didn't, it would be fine. The illusion would not be broken.

"I need to know how to wield the Dreadbrood," Finn said.

The Necromancer lifted an eyebrow that had but a few thin hairs remaining. "And?"

"I need to know how to wake them and how to control them," Finn added what he felt were unnecessary statements.

"*You* are asking *me*?" The Necromancer pounded his legs with his fists as he laughed so hard that he ended up coughing.

"I don't need to ask what's so funny. You stole the Dreadbrood. I am the one who is supposed to wield it, but I don't know how," Finn grimaced.

A few more coughs and a noisy sip of wine before the Necromancer answered, "I thought you would be more arrogant. You actually sound… *wise*."

Finn stared at him. "I didn't ask for this. But it's mine and I need it to save the people I love."

"You think you are doing this for love?" Another dry, wheezing laugh. "Interesting. I thought I was doing it for revenge. For glory. For an admission."

Finn didn't want to point out that while the Necromancer had stolen the Dreadbrood for himself, Finn was meant to have it. Instead, he just said, "There is an enemy–"

"The Fae–"

"No, not the Fae. I mean Marikoth is a Fae, yes, but he's evil. Not all Fae are evil."

He cast a quick look at the Necromancer who did not seem to agree with his assessment. "So you say."

"Marikoth has used Death Magic and it's warped his mind–"

"A *thief* then too. Like all the rest before him. Not content to have all the pleasures of eternal life, but wanting the power of Death, too." The Necromancer shook his head and tutted. "Yes, that's why it had to be done."

"Why *what* had to be done?"

"Their Empire grew so great because they stole our god's power, used it for their purposes in their eternal lands. But they gave no homage. No worship. No payment. They hated us and our god. They were greedy and wanting. All life. No death," he answered.

"Aeturnals need Death Mages in order to work their magic properly. They don't naturally accrue power within themselves for some reason or they do so very slowly. Death Mages–Death *Magic* allows a mage like me to fill up their magical reservoir," Finn explained. "They weren't stealing. They were just adapting, I guess you could say. And they didn't abuse it. I mean not before Marikoth. Not that I know of–"

"If you steal someone's gold, even if you put it to good use, is it still not theft?" The Necromancer asked.

"I see your point," Finn admitted. "But Rohan–he's the last Aeturnal–isn't like that. I'm not like that. I give him my aid freely–"

"Free? You think you are *free*?" The Necromancer let out a croaking laugh. "First love and now freedom. You are truly deranged to think these things!"

"Deranged? No, not in the least! I don't know what setbacks you had with the Dreadbrood, but my intentions for it are good and–"

"Do you even know why you are with this Aeturnal? Why I left the Dreadbrood for you? Why I

was *forced* to leave the army for you and will serve you like a dog in the future?" The Necromancer asked.

Finn froze. How many people had intimated that his purpose was evil? There was Hugues, of course. But there was Marikoth, too. And who knew how many of the old authors said it as well. When Tearlach translated that book for him, maybe he would think so too.

"I… I know what I *wish* to do," Finn answered.

"Yes, with all your *freedom* and your *love*. Of course, you believe in *wishes*," The Necromancer chuckled then wheezed as he started to get up from the chair. Finn stood up and awkwardly offered him a hand. But the Necromancer waved him off again. "When I cannot get up from my chair it will be the end for this body. But not yet. Not yet. I know what I am meant to do now. Why I am called to be here and why you are here as well."

Finn did not like the sound of that. The Necromancer grabbed a hold of a simple black staff with a red ruby on the top. It was plain, but it pulsed with power. Seethed with it. Gooseflesh appeared on Finn's arms. He both wanted and loathed the staff.

The blanket fell from the Necromancer's lap and pooled at his feet. He shuffled over it, the staff tapping, as he dragged the blanket for a few steps before he was clear of it. Half the blanket covered the dog's head, but the beast did not shake it off. It didn't even make a sound and Finn realized then that it was dead. Long dead.

"This way. You keep lingering, boy. You must move," the Necromancer said and he was already on the stairs that led up to the third floor.

Finn followed after him, but reluctantly. But he really didn't want to know what the Necromancer had to show him. Yet he didn't want to stay with the dead dog in this cheerless room by the fire. So he didn't mind the shuffling steps and grunts as the Necromancer wheezed his way past the third floor and then a fourth until there was a trap door above their heads that led up to the top of the tower.

The lower floors had been filled with more boxes and chests and dust. They had been silent. But as soon as the Necromancer opened the trap door, Finn heard the unmistakable sounds of battle. The *clang* of swords. The screams of dying men and women. The hot *shush* of magic through the air. And in that moment, he feared that his father and Rohan were fighting Marikoth and dying, because he was not there.

He pushed past the Necromancer and raced up onto the top of the tower. He nearly choked on the smoke that came from piles of burning bodies, not to mention some bodies that still walked and slew and roared. It was the Dreadbrood. They were facing off against the armies of the Fae. There was no Wall nor any time distortion. The land was still one even though the Dreadbrood had marched this far into it from Achuvia.

The Dreadbrood were horrific. Skeleton archers and swordsmen opened their bony maws to creak their war cries. Whoever they had been in life, they must have been huge for they towered above the tall Fae who were clad in gleaming armor. There were wolves larger than Tyreon with coats blacker than Skye's. They tore out Fae throats and ripped off Fae limbs. Some of them they ate. Others, they simply tossed away as the Fae screamed and bled out. There were monstrous horses whose backs were taller than the top of Finn's head. Even without riders, they charged into the Fae ranks, running the gleaming soldiers of life down. There were so many more horrors that Finn could not catalog them all.

"I was winning," the Necromancer croaked in his ear.

Finn spun away from him and pointed at the ghastly scene. "Winning *what*?"

The Necromancer stared at him.

"Everywhere you brought the Dreadbrood, the land died, the people starved, death reigned. There is no glory in this! There is no purpose in it!" Finn raged. "You're destroying all that is beautiful and good, because *why*?"

"They stole from our god."

"That's not a reason to slaughter so many!" Finn snapped.

"So say you. But I said otherwise," the Necromancer responded with a bloodless smile.

"And yet you were turned back by Death! It stopped you!" Finn argued.

"Yes, because it wanted a deal," the Necromancer spat. "No using Death Magic. No Aeturnal rule. Not unless they agreed to other terms."

Finn trembled. "What were the other terms?"

"Fealty to the God of Death. A representative of it on the throne forevermore. But they had rather cast down their great rulers than worship our god," the Necromancer growled. "So arrogant. So foolish."

Finn's forehead furrowed as he worked it out. "Without Death Magic, the Aeturnals couldn't continue to rule. Their magic dwindled. They couldn't use Bonded Ones anymore to restore their strength so they were cast out."

"By their own people," the Necromancer grunted.

"Yes, and all talk of Death Magic was forbidden. The rule of the Aeturnals was sought to be erased. Any Death Mage was killed," Finn spoke softly.

"Until *now*."

Finn's head snapped up at the Necromancer's tone. He stood before Finn, a walking skeleton swathed in black burial clothes. He no longer needed to lean on the staff to support himself. He was fully transformed. He held the staff above his head. The red ruby glowed with sulfurous light.

"The Fae broke their bargain! They allowed the Death Mage to live and rule!" The Necromancer roared. "Death's Chosen is to finish what I began! You will destroy them all!"

POSSIBILITIES

"Tell me how many power stones you can feel, Rohan," Thalanil requested.

Rohan's eyes were shut, but he could *see* the power stones. They were little pinpricks of light in the darkness behind his eyelids. If he turned his head to the right, eyes still closed, he could see a seemingly unending line of them. Turning to the left showed him nearly the same thing, but he could tell that they stopped by the sea. If he peered into the Empire, there were countless pinpricks arranged in orderly lines. Some of them were dark, either exhausted of magic completely or broken, he wasn't sure. But their absence was noticeable like teeth missing in a jaw.

"Too many to count," Rohan admitted, his eyes still shut.

"That is good," Thalanil sounded surprised. "I had no idea there were so many. People find them, but they're normally inaccessible to all but the most powerful mages so they are ignored."

"If I look into Rirea, I can see them too, though there are more broken ones here than there are in the Empire," Rohan explained. "Maybe some were dug up or simply damaged over time."

"And you can access every one?"

"I can. I'm trying to imagine filling all of them–let alone all the ones that must exist in the old Empire's domain–and it's a bit daunting," Rohan admitted. He thought, but didn't say, *Though it would be an excuse for Finn and I to make love on every square inch of the Empire.* Then he added, "But I assume you need me to energize this one and the ones that run along where the Wall will be again? The rest can wait?"

"Yes, I used this larger stone in the tree to conjure the Wall and the smaller ones to anchor and power it," Thalanil answered.

"So there was considerable power here still when you raised the Wall?" Rohan asked. "I'm asking because it's like a dry well now."

"Marikoth," Thalanil said his brother's name flatly, "must have been hungry. But the power stones were far from full even when I used them. I had to weave a considerable amount of my own power into the spell."

"The amount of power they can hold–even limiting it to the stones along the Wall–is considerable," Rohan explained as he probed the interior of the stones with his mind further. "I'm not sure if Finn will be able to find enough life to fill the limited number we need even if he drained all the creatures that have made their way into Rirea."

There was a pause and then Thalanil asked, "You feel pity for them, don't you? The creatures?"

Rohan sighed. "They are not here because they wish to be. They've been driven here. Driven mad."

"So you would spare them if you could?" Thalanil's tone was strange. Not quite neutral, but not

antagonistic or merely interested. It seemed the answers to these questions truly mattered to the Fae king.

"I would and I would get them back to where they belonged. If that weren't possible, I would make space for them where they could do little harm and little harm could be done to them," Rohan answered. "We share this world with them. It is not more ours than it is theirs. I would have them protected."

"You sound like a Fae, which is good considering everything," Thalanil answered.

Rohan smiled. "You believe humans don't think like that?"

"No, they don't conserve," Thalanil was certain of this. "But that is understandable, I suppose. They have one brief lifetime to gather as much of the world's resources as they can amass for themselves and their families. But in the end why protect a future one will never experience?"

"You answered yourself there. For the family. For our descendants," Rohan answered.

"They may think of their children or even grandchildren, but how many humans think beyond that? How many can even imagine such a time span let alone millennia? Few to none, I'd wager," Thalanil answered.

"What's happened to Rirea has shown everyone what happens when we are not careful stewards of the world," Rohan stated simply. "If this land can be restored, the memory of this time will affect how we behave going forward. I wish I could do that now with those creatures. But Finn needs– where is Finn? It's been too long. I'm getting concerned."

Rohan opened his eyes. He'd kept them shut for so long that the weak sunlight was almost blinding. He blinked rapidly in order for his eyes to get accustomed to the change. He was looking into the Empire as he did so and that was when he saw Marikoth.

"Thalanil," his voice was laced with alarm.

"I see him," Thalanil answered calmly, though he was like a frozen statue.

What they were seeing was a seemingly semi-frozen tableau of Marikoth on a wyvern flying towards Rirea. He seemed not to be moving at all, but as Rohan watched more carefully, there was some small movement.

"He's not headed for us. He's simply headed towards where the Wall was from Aymar. He'll be in *our* time and then…" Rohan couldn't finish the sentence. "Thalanil, we need to get the Wall up. *Now*."

Thalanil was staring at the rider and wyvern that were still very small and far away. His hands were clenched into fists and lightning sizzled and sparked between his fingers.

"Thalanil, we need to find Finn! All your magic would do against Marikoth is feed him," Rohan reminded the Fae king as he stood up, dusting off his knees.

Thalanil's head snapped towards him. The expression on the Fae king's face was a mixture of rage and fear. Rohan knew why.

"He drained me nearly to death, too," Rohan said carefully. Speaking with Thalanil was like walking between walls of thorns. But there must have been some softening in Thalanil's feelings towards him since he'd agreed to train Rohan. But he was certain those walls were still very close. And if he wasn't careful he could have a face full of thorns. But he pressed on, "The feeling of helplessness. The inability to stop him. The sensation of your very life eagerly flowing into him. I know it, Thalanil, and I hate him as much for showing me how weak I can be by taking my life force."

Thalanil dropped his eyes. "I was utterly defenseless against him. He killed my father and Shadeheart with impunity right in front of me and I could do *nothing!"*

Rohan tentatively touched the Fae king's shoulder. "I felt much the same way when you sent me

ass-over-tea-kettle back to Rirea. The truth is that there is always someone stronger than us. It just took both of us time to run into that person in our adult lives. But *Finn* is stronger than Marikoth."

Thalanil lifted his eyes. He nodded jerkily. "Yes, though both of us want nothing more than to protect him."

"He's going to protect us. All of us," Rohan patted Thalanil's shoulder and turned in the direction Finn had walked off towards. He didn't see the young man's lithe body between the tree trunks. He cupped his hands around his mouth, "FINN! FINN!"

Thalanil added his voice as well, "Finrael! You must return! Marikoth is coming!"

But all they heard back was the echo of their own voices.

"How far could he have gotten?" Rohan asked. "Surely not too far away that he can't hear us."

"Perhaps the time currents are absorbing some of the sound. We should step more fully into Rirea to see if that makes a difference," Thalanil suggested. There was a touch of unease in the Fae king's voice.

"There is little that could harm Finn here," Rohan reminded him, and perhaps himself as well.

"Accidents happen to even the most powerful," Thalanil muttered.

Both of them pulled out their pouches full of crystals. Rohan tossed one ahead of him and it fell halfway to the ground before freezing in place. The time current was not consistent in terms of height. He pointed it out to Thalanil.

"We must be very careful," the Fae king agreed.

Rohan made sure to toss the crystals up as high as his head and not to go beyond where they landed. He was almost grateful for the distraction, because he felt Marikoth getting closer and he still had not heard anything from Finn.

"Thankfully, Marikoth appears unable to teleport," Thalanil muttered under his breath.

"You can do that?" Rohan's eyebrows lifted.

"You will be able to as well," Thalanil answered.

"What else will I be able to do?" Rohan asked as they walked forward, tossing crystal beads and calling for Finn.

"The Aeturnals used their magic to build palaces, castles and more. Reave and Aymar are just two examples of their craftsmanship. The very earth responded to them. Some say that they created many of the creatures that are attacking Rirea right now, too," Thalanil answered. "They could enchant weapons, jewelry or anything really. They conjured great storms. It was said that when an enemy navy came to their shores not a life was lost on the imperial side as an Aeturnal queen raised a wave so large from the water that it blotted out the sky. Needless to say, it destroyed and drowned all the enemy soldiers. Those are just a few things Aeturnals have done."

"I wish I could do them now," Rohan muttered.

"Such magics take centuries, even millennia, to learn, Rohan," Thalanil warned.

His heart sank. "We don't have that kind of time."

"You said it yourself that our magic is useless against Marikoth unless we want to give him a meal," Thalanil reminded him. "So even if you could do any or all of those things, it would make no difference."

"I know and you're right. It's just the thought of what I *could* do to help my people if only I knew how." Rohan shook his head.

"You will. In time. If we survive this," Thalanil answered. "It will be *good* that the Empire will be restored and you will be among other immortals, though."

Rohan's eyebrows rose. Thalanil was assuming this would happen and that he would be… what?

King?

"Why is the immortal part important?" Rohan asked as he tossed another crystal bead ahead of him.

"Because everyone you know now other than Finrael, Ryleth and I will die," Thalanil answered simply. He added softly, "And it will break your heart."

Rohan opened his mouth to say something–he wasn't quite sure what–but the bead he had tossed didn't freeze or fall to the ground. What stole the words from his lips was that the bead had *disappeared*.

"Thalanil!" He held out an arm to block the Fae king from moving further forward into this strange phenomenon.

"What?"

Rohan didn't explain. He just threw another bead and both of them saw a flash of light and it disappeared. Was it just him or was the time current closer? No, it couldn't be…

"What is that?" Rohan asked.

"I do not know, but let us steer well clear of it and–Rohan, get back!"

Rohan felt a sudden breeze, but it was different in temperature and smell to this place and time. It was cold. So cold. And the smell was like death. Not sweet, rotting decay but simply the complete and total absence of life. The grave matter field above the Dreadbrood had smelled something like this. He felt Thalanil's hand on his shoulder, pulling him back for just a moment, but then the wind blew so strongly that it was as if Thalanil had been blown away and he was swallowed up.

Rohan squinted and lifted up an arm to shield his face as the wind stung his eyes. Finally, it slowed then ceased. He slowly lowered his arm and blinked. He was nowhere. That was his first impression.

Everything was gray. The ground. The sky. Everything. Just ceaseless, unending gray. The gray of death. The ground was cracked and lifeless. No trace of trees or grass or flowers was present anywhere. There were pools of black ooze where mysterious bubbles rose to the surface and popped. It was like nothing he had ever seen and yet he recognized this place.

It was where he had just been with Thalanil. It was the Remnant, but utterly drained to nothing. So he knew *where* he was, but *when* was it? He'd walked–or been pulled–into a time current that had swept him to another time, he realized,

The future? It must be. Oh, by the gods, no…

"Rohan?" Finn called.

His voice was soft and tentative, but there was something off about it as if he had not spoken in a long time, let alone said Rohan's name.

"Am I dreaming? Yes, of course, I am. You are long gone. Long… gone… and far from me. Forever gone and far from me," Finn said in a sad, listless tone.

Rohan was not completely surprised when he turned his head towards the sound to find Finn not looking *exactly* as Finn should look. Some part of him had always known that this future was a possibility. As he'd watched Rirea die a piece at a time. This was the natural conclusion of it. Yet… Yet…

This is the future… No, no, no…

Finn sat on a throne of bones and skulls. His hair was completely white. He wore all black. Black robes with a popped high collar. Black greaves over his legs. Black wrappings over his arms and winding between some of his fingers. Black boots. His eyes were black too. No pupil or iris. No white. All black like marbles.

What has happened to you, my love? What has happened?

Finn half rose from the throne of bones. He had a simple yet elegant staff in one hand. A red ruby glowed like witchfire on the top. It was the only color in this place. Finn's golden skin was bleached of color. His lips were pale, almost blue, too.

"Rohan? This dream is so *insistent,*" Finn murmured, more to himself than to Rohan. "I think my mind has cracked again. But that is good then. For you are here in this crack. And I have fallen into it with you."

Rohan gasped. "Finn!"

He knew that this was all wrong. He knew that this wasn't the Finn who had left him moments before. But it *was* Finn. A Finn. Still somewhat *his* Finn even though Finn looked… so different. Seeing Finn meant he had to hold the young man. Seeing Finn in pain meant he had to make it right.

He raced to Finn and gathered the young man–who looked more like the raven who haunted him than a Fae prince–and held him tightly. Finn was cold. Freezing. It was like hugging a corpse. But Rohan knew that this was his Finn and his Finn was in pain.

"Such a wonderful dream. Or is it torture? I have not seen your face or form so clearly in… I have lost track of time. Days and nights are the same. A gray nothingness. But here you are. Where you fell. Where I lost you so long ago." Finn breathed against his shoulder. "I lost you here so long ago to Marikoth."

Rohan froze at the name and he thought of Marikoth on his wyvern flying towards him and Thalanil.

And we can't find Finn. We don't find Finn. Not in time. If this is the future…

"He took you from me so I took the world from him," Finn whispered. "I must be dreaming, because I can't reach you now. Death's Chosen and you're dead and yet I can't reach you. How deep is this crack in my mind?"

Rohan pulled back so that he could see Finn's face. Those black eyes gazed up at him with alien understanding. Finn was like a shadow of himself. A ghost. A remnant. This was so wrong. This was utterly wrong. How could this be the future? He didn't believe it and yet…

"Finn, oh, my Finn, what has happened to you?" He asked.

"I lost you. You're gone. And never coming back, because there is no life here," Finn murmured. "No death without life. No life without death. Just nothingness."

His fingers curled around Rohan's cheek. They were icy, but Rohan forced himself not to move away from that desperate, uncertain touch.

"Ah, I can even *feel* you! How deep this crack is. And smell you. That scent of leather, sweat and spice," Finn murmured. "I could not conjure it truly before. But in this crack, I must be so near to the past that I can remember it once more. Bring it forward. Bring it to now."

"Finn, I am really here. I stepped through a time current in the Remnant," Rohan insisted. "We just left one another. Thalanil and I are coming to find you."

"But I was not there. I was not in time. In our time. I was in the past with the Necromancer. How right he was that my thoughts of love and freedom were foolish!" Finn gave out a cracked laugh. "But not even he knew how dark my fate would be."

"Finn, listen to me." Rohan cupped Finn's pale, thin face. "We have time to change things. We have time before Marikoth arrives–"

"He is already there. Was already there." Finn was looking at him out of those black eyes, but not seeing him. "Such a deep crack to feel your skin against mine."

"Finn, please," Rohan said. "There must be a way to change it. There must be a way to stop

this…"

"But I cannot be stopped." Another half-cackling laugh. "There was nothing left for me after you and Father were gone so I… made it all go away. Marikoth. The Fae. Humanity. Life," Finn answered. "But you–you're *here*… My sweet Rohan. If you were really here, you would hate me."

"I'm here, Finn. Thalanil and I were just looking for you," Rohan insisted again. "Marikoth is coming–"

"He came! He–he came! He drained you both!" Finn cried. His black eyes filled with rage and anguish. "If only I could kill him again! And again! And again!"

"No, Finn! No, don't focus on that. Focus on *me*. Marikoth wanted to rule with me, but he killed me instead?" Rohan clarified. "Tell me exactly what happened in the past?"

"He… he lost control, I think. Nothing was going the way he thought it would and… but you're *here*," Finn repeated and clutched onto him. "Just before he comes… you're here… Are you really here? No, it is my mind. The cracks in my mind. Playing evil tricks on me."

"Is the future set?" Rohan asked. "Is there nothing you can think of that will stop Marikoth? Can you not remember another way? Something that could be changed?"

Please let this be "a" future and not "the" future. Things have to be able to be changed. It can't work out this way!

"It's been so long I can't remember what happened," Finn told him and shook his head violently. "I don't want to! Don't make me remember losing you!"

Rohan framed Finn's face once more. That beloved face that was bleached of life. This could not be Finn's fate. Fair enough if he died, but he could not have this for Finn. He needed Finn to be happy and alive and the world to be a wondrous place for him.

"Where were you? After you left us at the tree?" Rohan asked.

Perhaps if he knew that, he could change things. If he got back in time, if he could find Finn, if he could change whatever happened to get them here… Was that possible? If he could go to the future, why not the past? Unless the future was immutable, but he did not believe that. He *would* not believe it.

"I was trapped in the tower in the past with Tearlach," Finn answered. "I remember that. Yes, he laughed at me for believing I had a choice."

"Tearlach?" Rohan stared.

"He's the Necromancer. He had no idea. Still hasn't in your time… in *your* time…"

Finn's brow furrowed as if an idea was coming to him, too. Was it what Rohan was thinking?

"Yes, Finn, I belong in the past. A past we can change. But you have to tell me what happened. How do Thalanil and I die? Were you there? Tell me all of it!" Rohan insisted, gripping Finn's upper arms.

"I wasn't there. I wasn't there… I came out of the tower and Marikoth was hunched over you both like a bird of prey," Finn whispered. The words of horror left him more blasted than before if that was even possible. "He escaped me then, but I knew that just meant I needed more power. More and more…"

"So we were still separated when it happened? Your not being there is what caused all of this?" Rohan gestured around them.

"Yes, yes, if I had been there just moments earlier I could have saved you both." Tears formed in those black eyes. "Rohan, am I dreaming? Of course, I am. The crack is deep."

"No, you are not dreaming, my beloved. And, perhaps we can make this nothing but a nightmare I will have." Rohan held Finn to him. His heart was crying out for Finn. "Are the time currents still

here? In this place? Right now?"

"Yes, I've tried to get back, but it doesn't work," Finn told him. "You cannot go back to where you have been."

"I wasn't where you were back then. Can I go to where you were?" Rohan asked.

"Yes, the far past when the Necromancer marched the Dreadbrood against the Fae," Finn answered, his gaze going distant. "He said it was my destiny to finish what he started, because the Fae had broken their promise to the God of Death–"

"Can I go there?" Rohan asked. "Is there a time current back to that point?"

Finn blinked and really focused him for the first time. "The tower… It was there."

Finn pointed to a part of the ground that was just as barren as the rest. No trace of the tower was left. How far in the future was this? Or had Finn's power grown so strong that he could simply unmake anything?

Rohan grasped a crystal and tossed it right to where Finn had pointed. There was a flash of light and the bead disappeared. He smiled. This could work! Couldn't it? If he went back to where Finn was, the two of them could then return to the present and kill Marikoth instead. Or, at least, stop him from killing Thalanil and Rohan.

"Where are you going?" Finn's hands clutched him.

Rohan hadn't realized he'd started to pull Finn towards where the tower had been. But he realized that they wouldn't be going together. He would have to leave Finn here.

By the gods…

He turned back to Finn and cupped his face. "Finn, if I go back to you in the past then this future won't happen."

"No, no, I can't lose you again!" Finn's hands tightened on him more. "If you're really *here* then you must stay."

Rohan looked around them. There was nothing, absolutely nothing. "How would I live here with you, Finn? I need food to eat and water to drink. But there is none here."

He wasn't sure how Finn was surviving here. Perhaps there was still a little life inside the planet itself. Finn blinked.

"It's all gone… I destroyed it all. Rohan, what have I done?" Finn asked, his eyes going huge with horror. "You must hate me–"

Rohan held him again. "You were hurt and lost and… this isn't going to happen. This isn't going to be our future. I'll make sure of it."

"But what if–if it is?" Finn whispered.

Rohan kissed Finn's forehead. "It won't be. I promise. I love you, Finn. I love you now and forever. Please remember that."

Leaving Finn there was the hardest thing he had ever had to do, but it had to be done. He had to go. It was the only way to stop this future from existing.

"I remember. It's the only thing I do," Finn answered softly. "I love you, Rohan. Always and forever. The crack is closing it seems."

Yes, let you think this is but a dream. Not that I am leaving you…

Another kiss–a long, last kiss–and then Rohan practically flung himself into the time current. He was doing this for Finn. He was leaving him to save him.

Between one blink and the next, his world changed again. Instead of the empty wastes of the Remnant, he was inside a tower with boxes and bound trunks all around him. There was a stairwell curling up along the wall. Faintly, he heard Finn's voice above him. Without any further thought,

Rohan raced up the stairs, calling Finn’s name.

CHOICE OR FATE

Finn backed away from the edge of the tower. He lifted his hands up as if to physically reject the war before him and the fate that was, allegedly, his.

"No! I will not continue this! I will not!" Finn cried.

The Necromancer turned slowly, his head truly looking like a skull now, and said, "You think you have a choice?"

Finn grimaced and continued to shake his head. He was denying he would finish what the Necromancer started, but it looked as if he was agreeing with the Necromancer that he had to go forward with it. He ceased the shaking.

"I'm trying to *save* everyone!" Finn yelled. "Don't you understand? I'm using my powers for good! To restore Rirea. To stop the overgrowth in the Empire. To bring balance!"

"That's not your role," the Necromancer sneered and spread his arms wide to encompass the battle all around them. "We all have a role to play and *this* is yours."

"I refuse! I won't do it! This is not my fate!"

Finn continued to retreat. He had to get out of there. He had to return to his present and fix this. He would never use the Dreadbrood against anyone but Marikoth. If he could kill his uncle without it, he would. There was nothing in him that sang to the sound of battle. The loud clang of swords. The whizz of arrows. The screams of pain and groans of death. If he could *never* hear those things again it would be too soon.

"You have no choice. This is what you were made for. The God of Death's punishment for failing to do as they promised," the Necromancer said.

"No one even remembers that promise! No one even knows it was made! No one even believes in the gods anymore!" Finn protested.

"More fool them. For the gods are real and they are jealous and cruel. Forget them and forget that at your peril," the Necromancer crooned.

"You can't hold people to a promise that they didn't make," Finn argued. "They are innocent. Not even my father knew the truth and he is the king of that land." Finn pointed to the Fae Empire. "How is this justice? How is it right?"

"The gods do not concern themselves with such things. They are beyond such things."

"They are not!" Finn growled. "They want to be worshiped and remembered? Then they must understand those concepts! Abide by them!"

"And who would make them do that? *You*?" Another sneer from the Necromancer.

"You are just angry because you stole the Dreadbrood and the God of Death stopped your pointless campaign against the Fae–more than the Fae–the world of the living!" Finn shouted.

"They have so much. We have nothing. They care not what happens beyond their borders!" The Necromancer hissed. "I *made* them care!"

"I know. I understand where you're coming from. The Fae behave as if the rest of us aren't even here. They try to separate themselves. But it's only because of the pain of loving mortals," Finn struggled to get out what he meant. But he was thinking of his father's grief at his mother's death and his seeming insistence that Finn not fall in love with anyone mortal. "Mortals die. Mortals leave. But the Fae remain. That pain is so great that they want to avoid it at all costs. So they retreat from all of us. Put up walls. Pretend that we're not all in this together. And what happens to one, happens to all."

"They've let Rirea starve," the Necromancer added.

"Only after my father thought he had been betrayed," Finn said. "It was wrong of him to think only of the rulers of Rirea and not the rest, but it is understandable. He thought that they were his enemies. Taking care of them was not something he felt he should do. And he didn't know how bad it truly was. Not until today. An hour ago. Maybe less."

And since that time, his father had offered to train Rohan to use his magic. Thalanil was coming around.

"I'm going home. Rohan and I will save everyone," Finn said.

"You are Death's Chosen," the Necromancer intoned. "You save no one. You bring only the end."

"You're wrong," Finn said faintly.

Just as he was turning towards the trapdoor to head downstairs and out that door back to his time, he heard Rohan's voice coming up the stairs. Shock had him freezing in place. The horror of Rohan seeing this–seeing the Dreadbrood and the Necromancer cackling about his fate–had him unable to react.

"Finn?! FINN!" Rohan called and, suddenly, the man appeared through the trap door. "Finn, thank the gods! There you are!"

"Rohan," Finn managed to say weakly.

Rohan was throwing his arms around Finn and holding him close. Finn's face was pressed against Rohan's chest. He wrapped his arms around Rohan's back while Rohan kissed his temple and forehead repeatedly. Finn just sank into him. Rohan's strength buoyed him and warmed him. He was not alone. There was someone else who believed in him.

This will not be my fate! I will not use the Dreadbrood to destroy everything!

"Finn, we need to get out of here. We need to get back. Marikoth is coming and if you don't stop him then everything will fail," Rohan rushed out.

Finn stiffened, but then he looked up into Rohan's face. His lover's expression was wrenched and determined. But this was more than Rohan simply finding him because he'd seen Marikoth coming from the Empire. No, this was *much* more.

Could Rohan know something of what the Necromancer said to me? Does he know something about all of this?

He meant the warring Dreadbrood all around them. The fact that he would wield them against *everyone*. But how could Rohan know any of that?

"What? What do you mean?" Finn asked. "What's going to happen? I–"

Rohan cupped his face. "I need you to trust me, Finn." His eyes flickered over Finn's face as if trying to read Finn's mind and imprint something upon him. "We need to get back. And, no matter what happens, I need you to promise me–*promise me*–that you won't lose hope."

"Lose hope?" Finn's voice was faint.

What did Rohan mean? What did Rohan know? How could he know anything? Hadn't Rohan just

been back by the tree with leaves of glass with his father? And where was his father? Surely, Rohan hadn't just left Thalanil alone to face Marikoth! Unless his father had insisted and Thalanil was quite capable of insisting.

But strangely, despite all of this seeming knowledge, Rohan didn't seem to be looking at anything around them. The fighting of the Dreadbrood and the Fae appeared to not worry him at all.

"Fate rules him," the Necromancer rumbled.

"Quiet!" Finn snapped at the creature.

But Rohan was already turning to look at the strange being. "You're wrong. This can be changed. No one's fate is set."

The Necromancer stared back at Rohan out of burning, dead eyes. He pointed a bony finger at Finn and proclaimed, "He was created for one thing–"

"I wouldn't be here if that was true," Rohan interrupted. "We have a chance. We have free will. We can change the future."

The Rirean king was so certain. Again, Finn wondered what–and *how*–Rohan knew all of this and what future was he talking about exactly? The one that the Necromancer had told him? Or another, worse one? Yet, there was no doubt in Rohan's voice or expression. Just a grim determination. Finn held onto that.

"Perhaps you do, but not him." The Necromancer shook his head again. "Both he and I are bound to our fates by the God of Death. I tried to change that and *look* what happened!"

He gestured towards the battle. Rohan glanced over. His expression grew grimmer as he saw the Fae dying in numbers that were stunning. Wherever the Dreadbrood walked, everything died. The earth became grave matter. The vegetation blackened and turned to dust. Finn imagined that spreading all over the Empire and beyond.

No…

But the God of Death had not allowed the Necromancer to march further into Fae territory. He had been stopped. If the God of Death truly wanted the Fae destroyed then why stop the Necromancer?

There must be some other path that would satisfy the god, but save the people.

"Tearlach, you would never say that in the life you have now," Rohan told the Necromancer, recognizing him as the Achuvien king despite hardly any flesh being on his big frame.

"Then I am a blind fool!" The Necromancer growled, shaking his staff at Rohan. "One cannot defy the gods. Not without consequences." The last was said softly and with a grimace.

"You don't even believe in the gods in this life, Tearlach, and you've done quite well for yourself. You're king of Achuvia," Rohan said even as he urged Finn towards the stairs.

"King?" The Necromancer's voice was strange. Longing and surprise.

"And our friend," Finn added. "We are friends, Tearlach. You are trying to help us. You're putting yourself in danger to do so."

"Friendship?" The Necromancer's voice was still strange though it held a note of derision as if he couldn't quite believe he was friends with anyone.

"Yes, and that matters to you, though I can tell you've had little of it in your life," Finn said as he put a foot on the top stairs.

"Perhaps there is something you know now that you could offer?" Rohan asked even as he kept moving. "Something that would help us win?"

The Necromancer looked over at the death and dying. Finn saw the Necromancer himself–young then–in the midst of the battle, looking more like Tearlach was now, slaying and grinning like a death's head.

"You cannot escape fate," the Necromancer muttered. "But… you can try."

The Necromancer suddenly threw the staff to Finn. He caught it in a firm hand and it felt like it had always been there, always meant for him.

With a laugh that was more like Tearlach's than ever, he added, "Fight! Fight for every inch! Make your enemies pay! Fight what fate has in store for you! Never stop fighting!"

Finn nodded as he lowered the staff to his side. "Thank you."

"Do not thank me, Death's Chosen. For I have all but ensured that you will face the gods' wrath the same as I did." The Necromance wagged a finger. "But I have not had such fun since."

"Now *that* sounds like Tearlach," Rohan grinned. "C'mon, Finn, there's no more time left. I feel Marikoth has come to Rirea."

The two of them clattered down the stairs. Rohan held onto one of his hands while in the other he held the staff. The wood felt cool and smooth against his palm and fingers. He could also feel the power in it. He was connected to it and it was questing for more life. Thankfully, it seemed to recognize Rohan and that he wasn't on the menu, so to speak. It was tugging him towards the door at the bottom of the tower.

"Did you come through here? I believe this is the time current that will lead us back to our time," Rohan said.

"Yes, through the door." But Finn hesitated as Rohan tugged him towards the door.

Rohan looked back over his shoulder. "Finn, there's no time–"

"I know." And yet, Finn could not move. "I need to know… did you see… Did the time currents take you somewhere? To some other *time*? Like the future?"

Did Rohan see my future? But I cannot imagine being with Rohan and becoming… becoming…

Rohan's face became smooth and expressionless. Finn's heart lodged in his throat. He'd been right. Rohan had seen the future. He knew what it was. And he thought it needed to be *changed*.

"Finn, in the end, all that matters is what we choose. We make different choices and there will be different endings. We're about to make one of those changes," Rohan told him, squeezing his hand tightly. "And I want you to know…"

Finn swallowed hard. He wasn't alone. Rohan took in a deep breath as if to steady himself before he refocused on Finn.

"I want you to know that–no matter what happens– you mustn't fall into despair," Rohan said.

"Despair? What–"

"You must *promise* me." Rohan's intensity increased. "You are needed beyond just me. The world needs you. You must be there for the world."

"The world and… *not* you? Why not you?" Finn's chest was so tight he couldn't breathe, couldn't hardly speak.

"Because I want you to know how important you are to all of this. Outside of me. Outside of us," Rohan insisted.

"I will not let the world fall to ruin," Finn assured him. "I will fight until my last breath."

"I know you will," Rohan said.

"But–"

"No buts, Finn!"

"But there are, Rohan," Finn told him. He swallowed as he glimpsed the throne of bones out of the corner of his eye. He carried the staff now that he'd always seen himself wielding in that dark place. "There's something inside of me–"

"You are *good*. The best I have ever known–"

"There is something inside of me," Finn protested. He swallowed again. "When I drain life it's *pleasurable*. Like a drug. Beyond that. It is as if I find my purpose in that moment. And I do not wish it to end."

Rohan was silent at this.

"I am able to resist it, in part, because I cannot bear the thought of you seeing me like that. You could not love that person," Finn admitted.

It was as if he were revealing a cancer inside of him to Rohan. Peeling back the tender layers to show the pulsing orb of disease beneath.

"When your uncle confronted me the first time about being Death's Chosen, I knew it was true. I felt it in my bones that I was different, even from Marikoth," Finn said.

"Different in a good way."

"I do not know," Finn admitted, which had Rohan shaking his head. "Whatever I was made for, I think meeting you changed me. Your kindness, your love, your friendship have made me want to be someone you would admire."

"And you are more than that though it has nothing to do with me, Finn. You are–"

"No, it does. I think it must. In the future… Are you gone?" Finn managed to get the words out. Each one felt like a piece of glass that he was having to spit up. To think of Rohan gone was to drain the world of color, of meaning, of joy. It left only the blacks and grays of death.

"We're going to change that," Rohan told him. "In that future, I die here. Marikoth drains me."

Finn knew his expression had changed into something that terrified Rohan, because Rohan pulled Finn to him and kissed him at that moment. It was a kiss of fierce love and devotion. It was a kiss that imprinted upon Finn. When Rohan pulled away, Finn could still feel him.

"Be Finn. Stay Finn. Please," Rohan begged. Finn opened his mouth to respond–with what, he didn't know. For Rohan said, "I will love you forever."

And then Rohan took them through the door. There was but a simple moment of darkness. Finn breathed it in and expelled it. He imagined he was breathing out any other darkness inside of him, too.

Please let that be the case.

They were on the other side. He knew from the moment he stepped out, because the slab the tower was built on was now crooked instead of standing up straight. There was no grass. No trees. No flowers. But there also weren't any Dreadbrood so that was a plus.

But then there was the minus.

"There you are!" Marikoth laughed.

Finn's head shot around towards the sound. His father was on the ground, seemingly unconscious.

Please be unconscious and not dead! Please, please, please…

Marikoth was perched above him like some obscene bird. A smile wreathed his lips, but did not reach his eyes. "Were you sightseeing in there? Strange, but I thought I would have sensed you before…"

Rohan was frozen, looking at the tableau. But he did not look afraid. Just determined.

I wonder if that was supposed to be him in the future he glimpsed. Well, I will not let that happen! I will not!

"How did you get here so fast, Marikoth? We were not *sightseeing* for that long," Rohan said coolly.

"Oh, I bet my brother told you I couldn't teleport!" Marikoth chortled. "But it seems that when I drain someone," and here he gracefully curled his fingers into a fist, "I absorb some of their abilities

too. It's been some time since I drained a magic user. So it was quite a surprise."

"Get away from my father!" Finn growled and stepped towards Marikoth.

"Oh, no, nephew!" Marikoth laughed. "I have so many more surprises to show you."

THE STAFF

Rohan unsheathed Lightbringer. It rang as it sprang forth. A cold, clear sound in the still air. The runes glowed as bright as the sun. He aimed the tip at Marikoth's heart. He remembered the Dreadbrood killing Fae here. This was a graveyard spot for immortals. Would Marikoth join them?

"Why are you pointing that sword at me, Rohan? Not that I wouldn't mind *another* of your swords swinging in my direction," Marikoth laughed lasciviously.

The Death Mage bit his lower lip as he gazed upon Rohan with undisguised desire. But whether it was to drain him or take him was incredibly unclear. Perhaps there was no difference for Marikoth now.

Marikoth's eyes traveled over to the staff in Finn's right hand. "That's a rather pretty staff you have there, nephew. Very plain, but its power… huh, it has no power. It's *empty*. How very odd! And yet…"

"You should not have come here," Rohan said through gritted teeth.

"I would not have had to if you weren't so stubborn, Rohan! I told you that I would stop the creatures from storming into Rirea the moment you agreed to be *mine*." Marikoth smiled at him almost dreamily again, which was a parody of desire in Rohan's mind and caused a shudder to run through him.

Marikoth had once been beautiful. In certain moments, he still was. In those moments, Rohan could see his blood connection to Thalanil and Finn, most of all. But there was no evidence of that beauty now. Like the past Tearlach, he looked more like bleached bone, and with his all white clothes, it appeared to Rohan as if he were a skeleton wrapped in his death linens.

"You sent these creatures here in order to blackmail Rohan to come to you?" Finn's voice was soft and dangerous.

Rohan's head jerked towards the Fae prince. He had not liked the future he had seen, but somehow Finn seemed *more* frightening now than the lost being he'd met in the desert.

If there can be more than one future, it does not mean the future we create at this moment is better than the one we cut off.

This thought was insidious. But Rohan did not reject it. He accepted it. All the fear that it brought with it. He believed in the goodness of Finn. He also knew that Finn's power was beyond his ken. Beyond even Marikoth's. His head swiveled back towards the Death Mage.

Marikoth does not know what I've seen. He has no idea what I'm seeing now. He's so used to being the most powerful one in the room. But not anymore.

Marikoth, he noted, was still perched on Thalanil's chest. The fingers of his right hand lightly

stroked Thalanil's left cheek. The Fae king's eyes were closed, but he grimaced every time Marikoth's fingertips skated over his skin.

Thalanil's drained down to nothing, but he still knows what's happening to him!

Rohan's own stomach churned, remembering being in much the same position with Marikoth. The inability to move. The total failure of one's limbs and powers. It was more than helplessness. It was a form of death itself.

"I made him the offer, nephew, because it's what is best," Marikoth answered simply.

"*Best*? You truly are mad if you think that," Finn spat out.

"No, I am quite sane! Clear and composed. I was very perplexed by you for ages," Marikoth explained. "There can be only one Death Mage in existence at a time. Or so the legends tell. When I met you, Finn, I assumed they were wrong. So many legends are wrong. But this one isn't. Do you even know what you are?"

"Yes," Finn answered stonily

Marikoth's eyebrows rose. "*Truly*? Then if you are as goodhearted as you pretend to be you must see that Rohan needs to be with *me*. Or is your good nature only skin deep? Does jealousy run you more than your desire to save people?"

"You are wrong about my fate and my purpose. Or… I will choose my own purpose and destiny. Regardless, you are not the answer, Uncle," Finn responded tightly. "You're too far gone."

Finn started to step forward as if to fly across the space between them and Marikoth. Rohan gripped his hand and held him back. Between them and Marikoth were dozens of time currents. They could easily be caught within them and it would be all over once they were frozen in time.

But, unlike with the other creatures, he was pretty sure that Finn needed to *touch* Marikoth to drain him. Yet there was no way they could dodge the time currents *and* get to Marikoth before he snuffed out Thalanil's life completely. But they could not allow the monsters to continue to rampage through his kingdom either.

Marikoth must die, but I cannot sacrifice Thalanil to do it. But what else can we do?

"Far gone?" Marikoth let out a laugh that sounded hollow and echoed weirdly. "Far gone from *what*? From *whom*?"

"You killed your own father," Rohan pointed out. "You drained his life when he was trying to help you!"

For a moment, there might have been a shadow that crossed Marikoth's face, but it was soon gone, if it had ever been there. The Death Mage shrugged.

"He exiled me. He earned his fate," Marikoth answered as if he were speaking of the sun rising and not murdering his father.

"And what about your brother? Thalanil loved you," Finn's voice cracked as he spoke of his father's love. "He loved you so much. He had no idea what had happened to you. He was not the cause of it. And considering his actions towards me, he would have been the same with you! You could have solved everything that's happened here together! All of us! Together as a family! But you hold him there an inch from death with no concern!"

Marikoth glanced down at Thalanil. His face was blank. There must have been love there once. Thalanil was his little brother. One who must have looked up to him with devotion and awe. But Marikoth looked down upon him as if he were a stranger. As if he were *meat*.

"He's a pretender to the throne," Marikoth finally answered. "Everyone but Rohan and I are. He should have gotten out of the way."

"Should he have? When should he have done that? When did you give him the opportunity? When

he found you had tried to turn my parents against him?" Rohan asked. "When you tried to kill him the first or second time? Was there any brotherly greeting or did you just go for the jugular?"

Marikoth smiled and wagged a finger at Rohan. "You and your nobility! I'll let you play the good king while I do the actual ruling. That will work out well. Everyone will love you and fear me. What a pair we'll make!"

"You're not taking Rohan," Finn said flatly.

Rohan saw Finn's hand on the simple yet elegant blackwood staff tighten. Was there a faint red glow in the ruby at the top? The past Tearlach had given Finn the staff to help him in the upcoming fight. It must be powerful.

"Because he's *yours*?" Marikoth mocked, tipping his head to the side. "If you truly know what you are, Finn, then you must realize that the only way things get better is if Rohan comes with me. You are the gods' attempt to stop us from undoing the curse."

Was that true? Was that the Death's Chosen's curse? But Rohan knew Finn's heart.

A heart that turned everything into a desert. A heart that broke so completely that he destroyed the world. But he won't do that again. Not now. He's promised me.

He hoped that it was the shock of losing him and Thalanil all at once, of not having seen or experienced what they both had in the past and future, which had allowed Finn to forget his love for others and fall into darkness.

What if the gods make him do it? What if they force him to? No, he won't agree. He won't.

"This isn't Finn's decision, Marikoth. It's mine," Rohan said darkly.

"Ah, yes, of course, here we are arguing over you like two hungry wolves! You are not a particularly tasty bone. You have a mouth. You can speak! Speak away, Rohan. I long to hear your honeyed words in my ears." Marikoth closed his eyes as if to enjoy what Rohan had to say.

Rohan grimaced. The desire to tell Marikoth to go to the hells was so strong. Everything this creature–no, *monster*–had done cried out in him to scream he would never go with Marikoth. He'd rather dig his eyes out with dull spoons than touch the other Fae or be touched by him. But Marikoth wasn't completely raving. Could he be reached? Could he be reasoned with?

"I'm waiting, Rohan," Marikoth wheedled.

"Some part of you must know that you aren't well," Rohan said.

Marikoth's smile was reduced by half. Faint lines appeared on his brow.

"I can see the hunger *physically* upon you," Rohan continued. "You are pared down to nothing. You look like you're starving."

Those lines deepened and Marikoth snappishly replied, "It's rather rude to speak of your betrothed's appearance like that, Rohan! Especially when I'm not at my best. I haven't fed–"

"Since when?" Finn asked. "Since you drained the Wall a few hours ago? You drained all of it–the huge wells of power that kept that Wall going–and you're *still* hungry. Don't you see? That hunger is just going to keep growing. If it's this bad now, how bad will it be tomorrow or the next day or the day after that? Or a year down the road? Uncle, you can't go on like this. There is no slaking your thirst for life. You know this better than even we do."

The smile died.

Rohan continued in Finn's vein, "You spoke of your father deserving death by your hand, but can you honestly say that you could have stopped yourself from draining him? Was it a choice? Or a compulsion? Could you resist?"

"You're holding on now by a thread. The only reason you have not drained Thalanil to dust and ashes is because you know that the moment you do, I will have you," Finn's voice darkened. There

was something remorseless in it. “But I think, even now, you wish you could drain him dry despite knowing it will sign your death warrant.”

Marikoth’s tongue licked his lips unconsciously.

“All the literature says that once we are bound, Rohan, the hunger will ease,” Marikoth said, looking rather more ghastly than before. He was a study in all whites and blacks like a line drawing rather than a fully flesh and blood man.

“I’ve not read that anywhere, uncle,” Finn told him. “I wish there was a cure for you. But there is *not*. You must stop this. There must have been a time when you cared for the Fae, your people, find that again! Please!”

“We do not want to harm you, Marikoth,” Rohan told the Death Mage. “We’ll try to help you. Find a way to help you.”

“Uncle, I do not want to be enemies. We are family. The four of us,” Finn pleaded.

Marikoth opened his eyes. They were blazing with power and malice. Rohan imagined that fire in them was Marikoth’s very life–and all the lives he had stolen–being burned away.

“Rohan, the Death’s Chosen is here to destroy *all* life,” Marikoth intoned. His teeth looked so white and sharp like a predator’s. Rohan could fully imagine him ripping Thalanil’s throat out as a wolf might and worrying at the tangle of flesh and bone. “Finrael is a poisoned chalice. He looks so beautiful, innocent and sweet. You long to take a sip from him, but every single drink causes your blood to clot in your veins and your life to ebb away. The God of Death itself sent him here. Made him in this image that would please you. But make no mistake. Finn is the *real* danger to the world. Not me.”

Rohan shook his head. “You and I are *never* going to be bound. I am *never* going to be yours. We are *not* ruling the Empire together. Surrender now or I cannot guarantee your safety.”

Marikoth let out a laugh. When he spoke it was with derision, “You really think you can go up against me and win? No! We Ravenspars stole from the God of Death himself and have lived to tell the tale. We *rule* because of it.” His head shot towards Finn even as his hand rested on Thalanil’s cheek firmly. “Take one more step, nephew, and your father is ash!”

“Let him go, Marikoth,” Finn growled.

The ruby on top of the staff was glowing now.

“What’s so sad about all of this, Rohan and Finrael, is that the two of you think you’re the heroes when it’s really me,” Marikoth told them. “I’m the one–I’m the one who will restore the world. I’m the one who will–”

Rohan saw the life leaving Thalanil as Marikoth started to rave. He really couldn’t help it, Rohan realized at that moment.

“NO!” Finn screamed, seeing it too.

Rohan hadn’t consciously thought to do it, but he sent a blast from Lightbringer at Marikoth’s chest. It didn’t vaporize him like it did everything else. But it didn’t feed the Death Mage either. It sent Marikoth spinning end over end into the Empire where he froze in mid-air like an insect in amber. Once more Finn made to run to his father, or perhaps to Marikoth, but Rohan stopped him.

“Finn, stop!” Rohan yelled.

He dug into his pouch of crystals. Finn did the same. Both of them began to frantically fling them ahead of them. The dozens of currents that Rohan feared being there were there plus half a dozen more.

“We have to get to him!” Finn cried.

And Rohan wondered if it was Thalanil or Marikoth that Finn meant. They weaved their way to

Thalanil's side. Rohan dropped down onto his knees beside the fallen Fae king. Finn remained standing, his gaze on Marikoth's frozen form. Rohan put his ear by Thalanil's lips to listen and feel for breathing.

"He's barely breathing," Rohan gasped.

He already used much of his power in the fight and in that single blast against Marikoth, but he began to draw all that he had and feed it into Thalanil. If he had thought the Fae king had been drained the first time he did this, there was no comparison to now. Even as he fed all he had into Thalanil it was like coaxing an ember to glow.

"Finn, I need more power! I'm losing him!" Rohan called out.

Finn was not where he had last seen him and seemed not to hear him. The Fae prince was walking towards Marikoth, tossing crystals. Marikoth was still in mid-flight. Hopefully, some time away from teleporting back to Rirea. But he didn't know. It could be moments.

But he can't teleport past the Wall. I hope…

Yet if he did not have enough energy to save Thalanil, how could he do that *and* fill the power stones to get the Wall back? It was impossible, wasn't it? But if Finn were to go after Marikoth now, go into the Empire and drain Marikoth, there would be no need for the Wall at all.

Thalanil will be dead though. Do I tell Finn? Do I stop him?

But he already knew the answer. Finn would never forgive himself if they had victory at that cost. And if he took that choice out of Finn's hands, his beloved would never forgive him.

"Finn, if you go to the Empire and attack Marikoth, your father… your father… Finn…" Rohan called after him. "I do not have enough…"

Finn froze.

"It's your choice," Rohan said. "Either way, I will do what I can, but…"

"But you don't have enough power to save him?"

"No," Rohan answered. "But if you kill Marikoth now–"

"Then it's all over?" Finn asked.

"Yes."

Finn spun around. The light in the ruby dimmed. His eyes were on his father. "I can't… Rohan." He looked back at Marikoth who still was frozen mid-tumble. "I can't let my father die."

"I understand. But we need power. A lot of power to restore him to fighting form and to fill the power stones to support the Wall. And we need to do it before *he* recovers." Rohan tipped his head towards Marikoth. "Can you get that much life in time? I don't think you can go looking for it, Finn, like you did before."

"No, you're right. It would take too much time and not be as effective as *this*." Finn brought the staff before him, holding it in two hands a few inches from the ground. "Marikoth said the staff was empty, but that's not quite right. It has a *gravity* that pulls life right to it."

"Can it get to Marikoth?" Rohan asked, wondering if both their problems could be solved.

"No, to drain him, I must touch him," Finn said with disgust. "But I don't have to touch anything else. One moment and I will have all the power you need."

Rohan's hands were on Thalanil's chest. He could just barely sense his heartbeat.

"Do it now, Finn. We don't have any more time," Rohan warned.

Finn's eyes closed. He lifted the staff up before him and then brought the tip down against the earth. There was a *flare* of red light that flowed away in all directions like a wave. When it passed through Rohan, he felt his breath stolen from him for a moment.

He followed the wave of red with his eyes until it was out of sight. There was a long, long

moment when nothing happened. Finn didn't move. He didn't even open his eyes.

And then the red wave returned.

It was bigger now. And glowing. It was like a wall of red that tightened around them from all sides. Rohan curled over Thalanil as the red wave washed over them. Once more, he felt his breath stolen as the magic sizzled over his skin. He tasted blood upon his tongue. But then the air cleared once more. Rohan looked over at Finn. For a moment, the Fae prince was standing in the midst of a tower of crimson with red lightning flashes appearing within it. But then it coalesced into a single thin thread that disappeared into the red crystal of the staff, which glowed like the ember of a roaring fire. Finn's eyes opened. For a moment, they blazed red too, but then they settled into the normal green. There was another lock of pure white hair.

"How much life–"

"There are only a few creatures left. Only the ones that will not cause harm," Finn intoned, his voice sounding like it was coming from far away.

"So much…" Rohan shook himself. "Please, send me some. A little at a time!"

Finn nodded and he felt the connection between them open as power flowed in. Rohan kept none for himself, but sent it spiraling down into Thalanil's still form. Unlike before, he needed Thalanil on his feet and able to use magic.

"More, Finn. Send me more."

The amount increased as their connection opened further. Magic flowed like a rushing river into Thalanil. The Fae king's eyelids suddenly flew open. Thalanil sat up like a shot, drawing in a huge breath as if surfacing from deep water. He was practically on his feet.

"Enough! I have enough!" Thalanil gasped and waved Rohan off. "Fill the stones! We need to fill…" His gaze caught sight of Marikoth, stuck in space, "we need to fill the stones. *Now*."

Rohan redirected the stream of power to the power stones. They had seemed bottomless before–and that was still true–but Finn sent oceans of power to him. He didn't fill up the tree with leaves of glass completely but spread it out among the stones that formed the boundary line. There were so many, but Finn had drained so many beings too. Finally, the stream began to thin.

"We have enough," Thalanil said.

Rohan opened his eyes. He hadn't realized he'd closed them. Thalanil was kneeling by the stone that was wrapped by the tree's roots. He had one hand placed flat upon it.

"I can raise the Wall and then some," Thalanil murmured.

His gaze shifted to his son and there were questions there, but Finn's eyes were still closed and he seemed far away from them.

"Can Marikoth teleport through it?" Rohan asked as he stood up on none too steady legs.

"No," Thalanil growled. "Remember to watch all I do, Rohan. Observe. Feel. Sense."

"Yes, I will."

The Fae king murmured words of power under his breath that had the hairs on the back of Rohan's neck rising. Thalanil's arms rose from his sides as well. Rohan felt the magic rising.

In the air where the Wall would be, the air shimmered. There was a greenish hue to it. He could feel the *bricks* of it. The lines of power that laced through it. As intricate as any work of art. Then the Wall was there. It flickered and was gone again. But in a moment it was back. This time as solid and real as any of them. Rohan had never been so happy to see it. He let out a breath, but that breath froze in his throat.

Marikoth was no longer tumbling in mid-air, but standing up on the other side of the Wall. He was but a dark shadow through the jade glass-like substance of the Wall. But Rohan knew it was him.

Through a glass darkly. They had gotten the Wall up just in time.

THE WAY IT IS TO BE

Thalanil watched as six Ostils arranged themselves in the courtyard of Reave Castle on a disk-shaped section of bare earth, and put down roots, forming a delightful little grove. They shook themselves, fanning their branches out to the sides. Flowers appeared on the branches and a sweet scent emanated from them. Then they went still as if they had always been there and always would.

Rohan patted the nearest trunk. Finrael stood beside him, but a little off from the Ostils as if he feared being too near would hurt them. His son kept the staff firmly away from the tree trunks as well. After experiencing just a taste of its power Thalanil understood why.

"There, there," Rohan said as he patted the trunk. "You're safe. You're happy. Give shade and peace from now on."

"It's amazing, Rohan, I think they hear you! They're listening and doing as you say," Finrael gasped as his gaze swept over the gentle branches. "How are you doing it? How are you convincing the Ostils to stay peaceful like this? Not even my ability to communicate with them would last for long, and it certainly couldn't produce this calm."

"I'm not quite sure. But I can *feel* them. The madness has left them now," Rohan answered. "They are tired and confused. All they want is a little warmth and some space to spread their branches and dig their roots. We can spare them that."

"Are they really not going to, uhm, get up and start walking after us again?" Serxio asked tentatively. "I saw one of them pull a man apart."

"They played tug of war with another. Holding arms and legs and…" Leonid shuddered. "I will never look at a tree the same way again!"

"They should stay put now and they shouldn't hurt anyone. They just couldn't find the right place to take root. They were crowded in the other part of the Empire," Rohan answered as he stroked the trunk. "And Marikoth sent them into a frenzy, herding them."

"It's hard to believe that these were the crazed things that attacked us first at Ryleth's village, then at Aymar and now here." Finrael shook his head in amazement as he continued to look at the tame Ostils.

"That was never how they were supposed to be." Rohan was frowning as if *remembering* this fact rather than simply guessing it. "That was a perversion of what they are. As I said, we should have no problems with those on this side of the Wall now. And, hopefully, we can fix what's happening in all of the imperial lands."

Rohan wrapped an arm around Finrael's waist. Finrael rested his cheek against Rohan's broad, muscular shoulder. The wind stirred the Ostils' branches and more of the sweet scent emanated from

them. In all of his days as king and even during his parents' reign, the Ostils had never taken root, let alone born flowers.

Rohan will be a great king, Thalanil thought.

He is a great king already, Thalanil! Silver Soul responded with a slight laugh. She was perched on top of the tower that overlooked the courtyard. Her head was hanging over the edge as she watched all of them like a very big cat. *And with Finrael by his side, there is nothing they cannot do. I was watching from the air when most of the creatures became ash. It was almost instantaneous. A wave of death that flowed out and pulled back like the ocean.*

He says he's not a Death Mage, Silver Soul, Thalanil said. *He's Death's Chosen.*

A blessing from the God of Death upon the Ravenspars? Ah, well, stranger things have happened, I suppose, she answered.

What do you mean?

I would not have thought the Dread One would voluntarily give a Ravenspar what Ravenspars before had stolen from it, she mused, sounding sleepy.

What do you mean? Thalanil asked, a little sharply.

As great as the Aeturnals' powers have always been, their weakness is their slow recovery rate, she answered and cracked her jaws wide with a yawn. *They needed a way to refill their power banks more quickly so that the great task of building Aymar and Reave could be accomplished. A clever Ravenspar found Death Magic. A way to drain life from one location and feed it to an Aeturnal. Replenishing them instantaneously.*

His head jerked up towards her. Her tail was swinging over the edge now, too. She was quite sprawled out. Was it that simple? In order to solve a problem with magical renewal, had one of his ancestors dipped into forbidden Death Magic and begin all of this mess?

But the Fae are beloved to the God of Life hence your immortality. You worship that god with all your might. Or used to, she murmured, resting her head on her forelimbs. *So to take from the God of Death without permission or homages was bound to cause trouble. And it did. So much trouble.*

Thalanil was about to ask her more when he heard a wyvern snore. Her eyes were closed and she was deeply asleep. Evidently, she found the subject tiring. Thalanil was transfixed by it. It turned everything he'd been told about Death Magic before meeting Finrael on its head. He wondered if his father had even known the truth of it. More information would be in the crypt below. Ryleth had already retreated there. Perhaps he should as well.

She'd said to all of them before disappearing inside, "Now that we have the Wall back, I'm not going to waste a minute finding out what we need to defeat that bastard. There must be answers in the crypt. I will find them."

Thalanil was pulled back to the moment as Leonid said, "It's not just these Ostils. The Guard tell me that the other remaining creatures are settling in too. Though I'm not going anywhere near the swamp. The crab-thingies went down into the mud, waiting for prey."

"Why, by the gods, would you consider going to the swamp under *any* circumstances, Leonid? Is that how your nails get so dirty? Are you digging in the mud?" Serxio looked askance.

Leonid narrowed his eyes at Serxio. "I'll take honest dirt over whatever it is you bathe in every day."

"You mean soap and water? I'm not surprised you're unfamiliar with the concept of them." Serxio buffed his very clean nails against his tunic.

"No, not soap and water, you idiot! That scent–that overwhelming *smell*–that you douse yourself with," Leonid insisted.

Serxio's head whipped towards him. "I smell of good things, Leonid! Herbs and flowers!"

"Men should not smell of *flowers*," Leonid harrumphed and crossed his arms over his chest.

"What should they smell of? *Dung*? If so, you're the most manliest man there ever was!" Serxio narrowed his eyes back.

Thalanil was distracted from the faux argument by Miles who brought him out a long fur cloak.

"It is chilly here, King Thalanil. And you're bound to get cold after fighting and sweating and… everything." Miles put it over his shoulders.

"Thank you, Miles. I do appreciate your thoughtfulness," Thalanil answered.

Miles pinked in pleasure.

"Have you been helping Christopher with his alchemical experiments while we were gone?" Thalanil asked, thinking he should check in with Finrael's other stepbrother. But only *after* he spoke to his son.

Miles' pink paled. "Ah, yes, he is not as appreciative as you are of my efforts, your majesty."

For a moment, Thalanil thought of Marikoth when they were both young and how he had often tagged after his older brother whether he was wanted or not. Though Marikoth had been a patient older brother, kinder than most, annoyance at times was natural.

"Christopher is a person who values his alone-time," Thalanil said gently.

Miles scuffed his foot. "He does, but I think it's more that he doesn't like being with me. He enjoys your company after all. Maybe it's because you don't mind his stinky potions."

Thalanil chuckled. "He would likely find your fascination with needlework and the weight of cotton just as distasteful."

"True. But he would be wrong! Good clothes are things of beauty. Milius says that I have a true eye!" The pinking was back and Miles sounded more confident than usual.

"You do indeed."

"Won't you come inside? I can have tea and cake prepared for you. Or wine and beef. Or–"

"Please see if the others–Finrael and Rohan, especially–need anything and don't forget to take care of yourself, Miles," Thalanil said.

If he had worried that Miles would resent helping people other than him, he would have been proven quite wrong as the young man seemed just thrilled to be asked to help. He bowed and sprang back up as he said, "It shall be done!"

Then Miles was scuttling off to ask if anyone needed anything and to get a meal prepared for him. Thalanil walked over to his son and, he supposed, soon to be son-in-law. Both turned towards him. Rohan bowed his head while Finrael hugged him before slipping back under Rohan's arm. They all looked up at the spreading branches.

"How are you feeling, Thalanil?" Rohan asked solicitously.

"Quite well. You seem to be getting quite skilled at returning me to full life from near death," Thalanil remarked.

"I hope I never have to do it again," Rohan answered genuinely.

"As do I. But each experience has taught me something about your powers. *Both* your powers, I think. It will be helpful in training," Thalanil said.

"Are we training more today?" Rohan sounded a little faint at that, but clearly he would do it if Thalanil were to insist.

"No, I think we could all use a rest and some food. Miles is already getting something prepared for us," Thalanil answered.

Rohan's shoulders slumped in relief. "I could definitely get off my feet. I retained some energy,

but not much. I wanted to make sure that you had enough for the Wall."

The Wall hung a jade green against the sky. It was stronger than before. It would stand forever unless he took it down or Finrael drained it.

"I had more than enough," Thalanil answered. "I do think we are safe from my brother for now. Not even the device my father gave him will work."

"We'll be ready for him if he comes back." Finrael was staring coldly at the Wall as hand tightened on the staff.

"Yes, about that," Thalanil began, "we should all talk."

Finrael paled and lowered his head, but he nodded. Rohan's jaw tightened. He did not say "no" but he, clearly, had no desire to say whatever had happened to him. Yet Thalanil would urge them both to speak the complete truth. It was necessary that they each understood everything. Lies and half truths had led them to this spot where they were battling a foe without knowledge for a future none of them fully understood.

The wind blew through the Ostils' branches and pink petals rained down upon them. Thalanil tipped his head back and felt the petals caress his face. A memory of doing something similar with Maeve struck him at that moment. It was such a clear and pure memory. Sunshine, laughter and love. A sense that all was right with the world and would get better. That was before he'd bowed to public pressure not to marry a woman who carried too much mortal blood.

I was a fool then. Maybe I've always been one just thinking I was clever and wise, Thalanail thought.

He had resisted the idea of letting Finrael and Rohan be together for many reasons, but, at the core of it, he didn't want Finrael's heart broken like his was. Broken beyond repair.

But he will not have the joys either if I deprive him of this. And it seems they are meant to be. I must ensure that Rohan survives and thrives, Thalanil realized.

He opened his eyes and gazed at Finrael and Rohan, arm in arm, smiling at each other and the tree. There were blossoms on Finrael's head that Rohan gently removed before lightly kissing his son's forehead. Finrael's smile grew and he could almost *see* the love passing between them. When Rohan caught him looking at them, Thalanil quickly glanced back at the Ostils.

"A battle that ended with something other than blood and death," Thalanil murmured.

"Marikoth certainly didn't intend this result," Finrael said with satisfaction.

Rohan nodded. "I wonder what he's thinking now."

Thalanil grimaced. "It cannot be good whatever it is. He never took losing well."

* * *

MARIKOTH GRABBED one his grandfather's precious vases–it was painted with wyverns flying in a night sky–with his magic and sent it flying to the other side of his throne room. A precious antique smashed! He ripped paintings of his ancestors off the walls and shredded them. The antique frames snapped and turned to splinters.

Chest still heaving with the need to destroy, he found that only the throne remained. A heavy thing carved of a single piece of moonstone. Upon it had sat every ruler of the Empire since its inception. Even the Aeturnals had sat there. The matching throne had been removed since Thalanil had taken over and had no queen or king of his own. Marikoth considered turning it to dust.

But why should he have to do this? Why should he have to destroy his own things? The

representations of his power and his long lineage? He *should* be in Rirea, destroying everything that was not Aeturnal. Burning the remnants of the human kingdom that had "played" at ruling even a sliver of the old Aeturnal Empire.

And after he indulged his desire to destroy, he should have been taking Rohan to bed and showing that mostly human man what true passion was! He would then be *full*. There would be no hunger like there was now, burning low in his belly like acid. There would not be this rage inside him like a living *thing*. And his gods-be-damned nephew and brother would be dead! There was a soft rap on the throne room doors.

"WHAT?!" He roared.

He didn't wait to see if the doors opened, but used his magic to throw open the doors himself. A young Fae woman–not more than a girl really–was in the process of backing away. She froze, though, as the open doors revealed her. She opened her mouth, likely to tell him why she was there, but he didn't really care what brought her here.

He thought to just drain her on the spot. But that really wouldn't satisfy him. No, one lithe body–however sweet–would never be enough. He swallowed his rage and hunger, smoothing his expression into one of almost beatific kindness. The wreck of the throne room notwithstanding and running completely counter to it.

"Tela, is it?" he asked, recognizing her. "You're the assistant to Lyari, yes?"

Religious people always gave him hives. Even before he'd had any idea what he truly was, he had despised them and all they stood for. Their simplistic understanding of the world was pathetic at best. But they were useful. There was nothing better than zealots for a cause. At least, in the beginning.

"Ah… y-yes," Tela said, her voice high and breathy. She quickly bobbed into a curtsey. "I'm sorry to b-bother y-you, my king."

"Oh, you are no bother," Marikoth lied. "What brings you here?"

He could very well believe she had heard his tantrum and decided to check on him. They really had no idea what he was. And if they thought that Death Mages were as peaches and cream kind–at least on the *outside*–as Finrael was, they would truly not know how to deal with him.

"My Mistress, Lyari, hoped to discuss the–the *Wall* with you?" Tela said weakly, making it a question rather than a statement.

He now knew why the girl had been sent. Lyari was smart enough to realize that the Wall going back up was a setback. More than that. They would all have *concerns* about it. They were questioning him already. And they had thrown this chit at him to avoid his wrath. They were foolish. It would not work. He ground his teeth.

Something of his rage must have shown on his face because Tela was retreating from him again. He smiled in what he hoped was a winning manner, but he wasn't sure it worked exactly. She froze again.

"The Wall was necessary to keep evil out. It is working now as it did before," he lied.

"I will tell my mistress that!" She gave him an uncertain smile and turned on her heel to go. To run. To *flee*.

"Tela!" he called out to her, which had her trembling as she just looked over her shoulder at him.

"M-m-my k-k-king?" Her voice was trembling.

"You must have many friends in the faith," he said. "Young and fresh and eager to meet their king."

Her eyes widened slightly. He heard her heart begin to race. "I–I–"

"I'm sure you *do*. You *best* have some. Because I would like to meet them. And if I don't meet

them… I'll *meet* you," he said simply.

All the color left her face. She nodded like she was a marionette and he pulled the strings. Then she ran. But there was nowhere far enough from him now. The Wall was back up and they were all trapped inside here with him.

SHADOW

Later that night…

The wolves were in their bed again. The new, bigger, better bed was being built, but it would not be done for some time. Tyreon and Skye's tails lifted first and began to wag then their pups got in on the deal. They were all still laying down, covering every square inch of bed space, and everything else about them was still except for those tails.

Rohan crossed his arms and lifted his right eyebrow. "No matter how cute you are, it won't work. Off the bed."

The tails wagged harder and some of the pups whined and dared to open their big eyes at him.

"No, no, I don't care about the puppy eyes you're giving me. There need to be some *rules* about the bed," Rohan told them in all seriousness even though his lips were threatening to twitch up into a smile.

Tongues were now lolling out.

"The bed is *mine*. I let you lay on it. And now I'm saying you must go," Rohan told them. When there were more pathetic whines, he added, "For a little while!"

Tyreon rolled onto his back to expose his belly, all four paws waving in the air helplessly. Rohan pursed his lips and took a step forward. One of his arms loosened from around his chest and reached for that fluffy tummy. He pulled it back at the last moment.

"No! No, I will not be won over by the tummy!" Rohan shook his head. "I will have my bed tonight. It's been a very long day. Out."

He pointed meaningfully to the floor. All the pups were on their backs now, wriggling, and exposing their tummies too.

"Oh, for the gods' sake! You are irresistible!" Rohan buried his face in puppy tummies, kissing them all, while rubbing as many others as he could reach with both hands.

It was only Finn's laughter that had him lifting his head up, spitting out some fur, and giving his beloved a sheepish look.

"I had the best of intentions, Finn!" Rohan wailed as he fell back into a pile of wolves.

"I know. They have great power over you," Finn said with a shake of his head.

"Over anyone. Everyone! Not just me," Rohan protested even as he was laughing.

"I'm sure." Rohan was being licked on every available bit of bare skin when Finn said, "Tyreon, Skye, pups, Rohan and I need some alone-time. Please go down to the kitchen for some food. You'll know when to return."

The wolves filed off the bed with no hesitation. Rohan stared at them with an open mouth.

"Traitors! Finn, how did you get them to go with just a few words when they ignored me

altogether?" Rohan demanded, even though he had a pretty good idea why.

"They know who the soft touch is." Finn grinned.

"You were the one who wanted them to sleep with us in the first place." Rohan slumped back. "If we had set up firm boundaries back then, they would know who's boss."

"They do."

"They know it's you," Rohan laughed.

Finn had a bottle of wine in one hand that had been left over from their meal with Thalanil, Serxio, Leonid and Miles while in his other he carried the staff. They'd tried to get Christopher to join them but he was hip deep in undead research. Tearlach was still hunting with his men in the outskirts. Ryleth was intent on researching. Queen Artremaya had been covered in the intestines of monsters. She'd literally waded into a fight.

"I need a bath to end all baths," she'd said. "Tomorrow I shall be recovered enough for company."

"The King of Bolan should be here tomorrow," Rohan had answered.

"Then since we will be all assembled, it will be time to talk. Unless there is yet another invasion coming our way?" She'd made that last comment a question and looked at him solidly.

"Father controls the Wall," Finn told her. "We are safe for now."

She nodded. "I'm still getting over the walking trees and having wyverns on our side. I look forward to meeting tomorrow."

Their own meal had been surprisingly quiet. They'd defeated Marikoth. They'd restored the Wall, which was something he'd never thought he'd be happy to see. There had been some deaths and injuries. Not as many as there would have been, though, if the countryside wasn't mostly abandoned due to the drained land and the undead. Those hardly sounded like good things, and they certainly weren't on their own, but at least it meant there were fewer of their people for the creatures to kill.

And now the creatures that remain are mostly docile. So long as they are left alone, they will leave us alone.

Yet it had not been a celebratory meal in any way. Even though he had been the only one to see that *other* future where Finn was alone in a blasted world, he couldn't shake the pain that had been in his beloved's eyes. He kept seeing it over and over again. Could that future still happen? They'd stopped Marikoth from draining him at this point, but what about in the future? If Marikoth found a way around the Wall–or when they inevitably had to face him–what if they failed and Rohan was drained to death?

The logical way to stop that future from happening–even if I fall–is to tell Finn what I saw. That way he knows that to let go because of grief will only lead to worse things.

Finn carefully leaned the staff against the wall beside Lightbringer. He was so careful for it to not touch anything but what it needed to touch and *never* a person that Rohan wondered exactly how powerful it was.

Finn poured the rich red wine into two glasses. He handed one to Rohan, who had managed to sit up and rest his back against the headboard. Finn sat beside him. It was then that Rohan heard the murmur of the servants in the other room and the splash of water.

When he looked down at Finn for an explanation, Finn said, "Artremaya isn't the only one who needs a bath to end all baths."

Rohan nodded as he slid an arm around Finn's shoulders and kissed the side of his head. "We do smell a bit like monster and–and–"

"Magic," Finn filled in. "It's not unpleasant, but it's a little bitter. Like tasting lightning on your

tongue. That ozone flavor before the storm hits."

"I agree." He kissed Finn's head again.

Finn linked their fingers together with Rohan's free hand.

"You were amazing today," Finn said. "I think even my father could picture you as king of the Empire of the Eclipse Throne."

"*One* of those kings. For you would be the other. And I am happy to be in your shadow."

Finn smiled, but it didn't last long. "My shadow… that's what I wanted to talk to you about. You didn't mention exactly what happened after you left my father and before you found me. Something happened. I know that much. But what?"

Rohan stiffened even though he knew he had to tell Finn what he'd seen. "I was transported in time as you were. But not the past. The future. A *possible* future. One which would have happened if we hadn't stopped Marikoth today."

Finn swallowed. "I understand that to be so. But what *exactly* happened in that possible future? You looked so… so… I do not know the word to describe it."

Rohan thought about prevaricating again, but didn't that mean he feared that no matter what he said that Finn would end up in that terrible place? And he *didn't* believe that. The shock and horror of losing them both had simply pushed Finn into an apocalyptic mindset. But they'd avoided that fate and now he had to tell Finn all of it so, no matter what happened, Finn would keep hold of himself.

"I was sent to the far future. Same location, but… there was nothing left to identify it. Just a desert," Rohan explained slowly. "There was nothing alive. You sat on a throne of bones. Completely and utterly alone with not even plant life for company. You thought I was a figment of your imagination."

Finn shuddered. Rohan held him tighter. "I drained all life, didn't I?"

"You did."

Those two words felt like anvils tossed into a still pond.

"Why? Why did I do it? Did I say? Was I–was I *fated* to do it?" Finn's voice grew tight.

Rohan squeezed Finn's hand. "No, it was a choice."

Finn let out a strangled laugh. "A choice? So I killed everything? I choose to do that, because why?"

Rohan rolled his lips. "I believe you were… no, I *know* you were pushed over the edge by shock and loss. You see, if today had gone as it was supposed to for that future to occur, you would have returned from the tower to find Thalanil and me dead. Killed by Marikoth."

Finn let out a breath. "You could have been… father could have been… both of you would have been *dead* right now?"

"Yes, that is what you said. That you arrived back too late."

"And you were not with me?" Finn clarified.

"I was not. You showed me the time current that would lead to you and so I went back to the past where you were. I think everything changed at that moment. A branch was created and another was cut off," Rohan explained.

For a time, there was only the crack and pop of the fire and the happy laughter of the servants as they prepared his Finn's bath.

"What was I like?" Finn asked. "Evil? Brooding? Guilty?" And in a smaller voice he breathed, "Hungry?"

"None of those things. You were a ghost of yourself. Your mind…" Rohan found he could not speak more of it. He drained his glass of wine and set it to the side. He clasped Finn's hand in both of

his. "It was so hard to leave you there. Alone. But I knew that the only way to make sure that never happened was to go."

Finn looked up at him. "You should feel no guilt, Rohan! I was a monster! I behaved–"

"You could *never* be a monster, Finn! Never! What happened to you disturbed the foundation of your being and–"

"We've both always said that we are acting not just for each other, but for the people of this world, Rohan," Finn responded, his voice raw and aching. "But the truth is maybe any goodness I possess is a thin veneer, held only in place by your love."

"You are not alone in this. I would have done the same," Rohan said. "If I had your power, I fear what I would do with it if I lost you."

"You would use it wisely–"

"Finn, it is easier to be lost than to lose. I would go mad, too, if I had lost you. I am just grateful that my powers are nothing compared to yours for I would make the world suffer for your loss,' Rohan said.

Finn looked at him with such sweetness. "No, Rohan, you wouldn't. Yours is the power to build, to create, to bring life. That is who you are. Yes, you would be sad and mourn me–"

"All the days of my life."

"But you would not destroy the world. You would still go on. You would protect the people. You would do whatever you could to help them." Finn said nothing for a long time again, but finally added, "People have hated and feared me all my life, because they knew I had Fae blood."

"Oh, Finn," Rohan's grief at this came out in his voice. "That I ever allowed my uncle to spread such prejudice and hate–"

"But they were right to fear me, Rohan," Finn said.

"No, never! You–"

"Can destroy the world. I can destroy the world," Finn repeated. "And I *did* do it so you cannot say that I never would. I *did*."

Rohan held Finn to him. "You were in such deep distress when I found you. Not yourself at all. You were so lost, Finn. I hated leaving you like that. But I had to get back to make sure that–"

"It never happened. Yes, exactly. It must never happen."

Finn laid his head in Rohan's lap. Rohan immediately began to card his fingers through Finn's fine hair.

"Now that you know what the future is–and we passed one inflection point at least–it cannot happen," Rohan said. But he felt like he was trying to convince himself as much as Finn as he stated, "That future is gone. Like smoke in the wind. It cannot occur."

"But other futures that are just as bad can," Finn pointed out.

"You won't go down that path, Finn. You know that such a future does not bring me back, does not give you the satisfaction of vengeance. It is just an empty desert with nothing and no one."

Rohan's lips skinned back from his teeth at the thought of Finn being in that headspace, of being so terribly lost and broken again. He would do anything to keep that from happening.

"No, I won't, Rohan. I won't allow that to happen. I promise," Finn told him, his breath puffing against Rohan's thighs.

Rohan let out a shuddering breath that he hadn't realized he had been holding. "I know. It was the shock of us being gone after you faced the Necromancer that did it. You just didn't expect–"

"And yet I would have. I would have thought that it was all part of my destiny."

Rohan blinked. "Why? Because the Necromancer failed in his mad plan against the Fae then you

will have to pick up his useless war?"

"The Necromancer believes that my destiny is to finish what he started. You heard him. To march the Dreadbrood against the Fae, because they allowed a Death Mage to live, remember? He was very clear on that."

"He gave you his staff."

"But only because you were there," Finn said and a tremor ran through him. "I would have simply run away from that battle with nothing but fear in my heart and then I would have found you dead. Everything would have… ceased for me. All else that I cared for would have fallen away, because I would have accepted what the Necromancer had said. And I am certain that the God of Death would have been cheering me on to my doom."

Rohan shut his eyes for long moments. He could imagine that shock. He could imagine that pain. And there was that blasted expression on Finn's face in the future as if all he'd been had been wiped away in a moment. As if he was so deep in despair and mourning that he couldn't see above it.

I will not let that be his fate. No matter what I have to do. I will save him.

He opened his eyes and centered himself, trying to find the facts that they could use to fix the future.

"Your father's discussion with Silver Soul earlier seems to indicate that the only way the Fae were not destroyed the last time for stealing Death Magic was because they agreed to boot the Aeturnals out and never allow a Death Mage to live again," Rohan said as he caressed his beloved. "They've broken one rule and we need to break the rest to restore the land."

The fact that Silver Soul of all people had known this–though she likely did so because she had *lived* through some of the events she spoke to Thalanil about–was still amusing in a dark sort of way to Rohan. They could have simply asked her instead of rooting through all those books. Not that she was a substitute completely.

While he and Finn had headed to their bedroom, Thalanil had joined Ryleth in the crypt to translate more of the material stored below. The Fae king had informed him as he'd left them to get a lot of sleep, because Rohan's magical training would start in earnest the next day: "bright and early." But his foolish fears about training were pushed away as Finn was talking again.

"I'm not going to be the God of Death's method of punishing the Fae," Finn said with gritted determination. "I think everyone has suffered enough since the Empire was broken and the Aeturnals were sent away. We can't go on like this. The God of Death cannot expect it. We are in a trick box. But aren't all deals like that? At least, Fae deals are. But this time, the Fae and everyone else is on the losing side."

Rohan nodded. There was no way for them to keep to the promise when that would only lead them to another doom. He said as much, "What I saw in the possible future was terrible, but if we don't stop what's naturally happening now, the future will not look much better. There must be another way to make this work."

"The God of Death sometimes comes to me," Finn said carefully. "In the form of a raven that only I can see."

"I saw it that one time, I think. When it led me to where you were with Thalanil," Rohan reminded him.

"Yes, it can appear to others, but mostly it doesn't."

"Do you… do you see it now?" It was a little–no, a *lot*–unnerving to think a god could be hanging about in their bedroom without him knowing about it.

"No. It's hiding," Finn sounded darkly amused by this. "It knows I'm angry."

Rohan caressed the cusp of Finn's ear. "So even the God of Death respects your anger."

"I don't know. In some ways, it acts like a child," Finn admitted. "As if it doesn't wish to be scolded. Though if I am simply its tool–its weapon–like the Necromancer said I don't know why it would care what I think or feel. If there was no free will for me then those things shouldn't matter. It can simply just make me do whatever it intends."

"You're right. So if you do have free will–and I think you do based upon everything I've seen of you–then you don't have to do what it wants," Rohan said. "You don't have to follow the Necromancer's failed war plan. You don't have to punish the Fae for letting Marikoth live or putting an Aeturnal on the throne."

"But if I don't it might do something worse to us," Finn admitted with a shiver. "Though what could be worse than death overtaking all the land?"

Rohan couldn't imagine either.

"It was angry because the children of the God of Life stole magic from it and didn't give it credit or worship it," Rohan said, stumbling a little to get his thoughts out. "What if it were to receive that?"

Finn lifted his head from Rohan's lap and got up on one arm to look at him. "What do you mean?"

"Finn, if you and I are to restore the Empire together–and you are Death's Chosen–it means that the Fae, the humans, everyone will owe the God of Death a debt," Rohan explained. "You will be a leader of this land for eternity. Death's powers will help keep balance. No one will forget the God of Death again while you rule."

Finn blinked slowly. "You're right. People might worship it again. Not out of fear. But out of respect for the good that it does."

Rohan nodded. "What is more powerful than having immortals like the Fae worship Death and understand the necessity of it? Or even the mortals who fear the end of their time on this plane come to understand that there is value to such cycles of birth, death and rebirth?"

Finn's head jerked to the side. His eyes were tracking something that Rohan couldn't see. Finally, whatever it was went out the open balcony doors and, for a moment, Rohan thought he saw a raven flying against the moon.

"Finn, was that–"

"Yes," Finn murmured with a touch of awe in his voice. "It was the God of Death. It was listening to us."

"Did it say anything to you?" Rohan was tense, waiting on the answer.

Finn's gaze swung back to him. There was a very faint smile on his lips. "Not exactly, but I *felt* what it was feeling."

"And that is?"

Finn's smile grew. "That we are on the right track, Rohan. That there is a way to save everything and everyone and honor both death and life."

THE COMING OF KINGS

Finn was sitting in the center of the Ostils in the courtyard of Reave Castle. The trees bloomed continually, especially after his and Rohan's lovemaking session in the bath last night. He smiled just thinking about it.

Rohan's body had been all wet and slick. Finn had ridden him. The water had sloshed out of the tub in tidal waves as they'd moved together. It had taken ages to mop it all up so the staff wouldn't have to. They'd cried their completion into each other's mouths in a breath-stealing kiss. Fireworks had lit up inside of Finn and the sky had flared with them too.

The Ostils definitely had benefited from the influx of power. They looked far healthier than before and they seemed far more peaceful. He leaned his back against one thick trunk. After a momentary hesitation, Finn drew one of his hands along the smooth bark.

He could feel the life in the Ostil. It practically jumped to the surface to greet him. He took none of it. He patted the Ostil gently. It was safe here as long as it didn't harm the good and innocent.

The *clip-clop* of horses' hooves and the howls of dogs drew Finn out of the grove to discover Tearlach and his people returning. He found himself eagerly coming up to the Achuvien king, but also feeling a trace of shyness, too. Meeting Tearlach's former self in the Necromancer–knowing how connected they were and his offer of the staff–had warmed Finn significantly towards the Achuvien king. But Tearlach, of course, knew none of this and Finn wanted to fix that.

"Tearlach, you've returned! Did you have a good hunt?" Finn asked.

"There was a lot of death so it was good!" Tearlach chortled.

Finn saw that there were many severed heads hanging from their saddles. The dogs were racing around the horses and snapping up at some of the still bleeding necks.

"I caused quite a bit of that death, too," Finn said, which he realized sounded like he had enjoyed it as well.

Maybe I did. Using my power without having to hold back felt good.

His hands flexed at his sides as he imagined he felt the smooth, silky wood of the staff under his hands. It increased his already significant ability to hold power. He could draw more in and flow more out without exhausting himself. And he owed this to Tearlach.

Tearlach wagged a finger at him in mock disappointment. "I know. I was quite displeased with you when all of our prey vanished into dust before our eyes leaving only the dregs to chase. But we killed many despite all of that."

The Achuvien king easily swung his big leg off of his war horse. The horse let out a huge breath as if relieved to be free of the weight. Tearlach's dogs immediately came up and circled those tree trunk-like legs. He patted them absently, but his eyes were on Finn.

"Little one, what makes you look at me like that?" Tearlach asked, his eyes narrowing.

Finn found himself flushing, which would make his answer seem like more of a lie than it already was. "N-nothing, I just wanted to–to speak with you."

But what exactly did he want to say? If he explained who Tearlach was in the past, would that help or hurt the Achuvien king's view of himself now? Would he want the staff back?

He cannot use it this time around. It will kill him if he even tries. But he might not believe me about that.

Yet Finn couldn't imagine holding it within his presence and not having him know the truth. And again, there was the fact that he felt a stronger connection to the Achuvien king than he ever thought to. They were connected in a very near way. Didn't Tearlach deserve to know that?

Tearlach stared a few moments longer and then grunted as if he figured out why Finn was acting so strange. He firmly patted the dogs on their sides before standing up. "Ah, you are buttering me up to see if I have completed that translation for you. I have only glanced at it."

Finn held up a hand and shook his head. "No, not that. With everything going on, I could hardly hope you had time to even do that. No, it's about something else."

"Are you going to make me guess?" Tearlach chuckled. "With all this blushing and fidgeting, I'm certain to get the wrong idea."

It was Finn's turn to give him a narrow-eyed stare. "Friends, remember? Only friends."

Tearlach shrugged. "You are my only friend. You must understand I do not know how this works."

"You're a very smart man, I'm sure you can figure it out," Finn answered, but then grimaced, "You just got back from hunting. I'm sure you're hungry, thirsty and want to bathe."

The last was more *Finn's* suggestion. He was sure that Tearlach cared little if his body stewed in his armor though Tearlach's scent wasn't unpleasant exactly. He smelled of old books oddly though his armor was metal not leather.

"I will sup and drink before I bathe. You can talk to me as I do this," Tearlach told him.

Finn bobbed his head. "That sounds good."

Tearlach, Finn and the dogs all went into the castle and up to the Achuvien king's rooms. Tearlach paused at the door and gave Finn a rather lascivious wink.

"I do not know if my Rohan would like us being alone together in my rooms," Tearlach chortled.

Finn lifted an eyebrow. "The dogs will be there. And if I make a move against you, you can club me with your sword."

"*You* make a move… ha! Ha! Ha! Yes, yes, if my honor is to remain intact I will keep myself armed with you around, Prince Finrael!" Tearlach kept laughing as they went into his tower rooms.

There was a large table with several comfortable chairs. The fireplace was already lit and a young maid, no older than Finn, was already putting out wine, bread and cold beef. Another servant, who Finn was shocked to discover was Thomas, set out a wheel of the good, aged cheddar. Their eyes met and Thomas froze.

"You know this servant?" Tearlach sat on one of the chairs and put his muddy boots up on the table.

Finn pushed them off. "Yes, his name is Thomas. He made a deal with the Fae."

"And he's alive to talk about it?" Tearlach's eyes widened slightly. "Or did he make a deal with *you*? If it's you, he probably has a pretty good life ahead of him."

"He was serving Ryleth when I met him, but she ended his servitude. Now he works for Rohan to pay a debt that I'm not sure is possible to pay off," Finn said coldly.

Another chuckle emitted from the Achuvien king. "Oh, Thomas, to have this little one speak so

coldly of you is not good! You must watch yourself!"

Thomas cringed, but turned it into a bow as he hurried out of the room, leaving the cheese only after Tearlach reminded him of it. Butter, vinegary mustard, sweet fig chutney, sliced tomatoes, crisp lettuce and homemade bread loaves were on the table. The young woman poured them both some of the rich red wine that Reave Castle was famous for. She curtseyed and left them alone.

Tearlach immediately began to carve the roast beef and gestured for Finn to cut slices of bread for sandwiches. Tearlach then prepared two sandwiches, putting one loaded with beef for Finn in front of the Fae prince. Finn, guessing that Tearlach expected him to balk as he was the "little one," grabbed the sandwich and took a huge bite. It was so much it was hard to chew, but he smiled at Tearlach through teeth filled with meat and cheese and bread. Tearlach cracked a smile and bit into his sandwich as well.

They both chewed companionably for a time. Finn took large gulps of the spicy wine so that he could get the large amount of sandwich down. He surprised himself by how hungry he was and how good of a sandwich Tearlach had made.

The dogs circled them, ever hoping for one of them to drop a smidgen of beef or a stray crumb of cheese. Tearlach occasionally would pick off a piece of his sandwich and toss it to one of the dogs that would leap in the air and gobble it down. The other one would growl until Tearlach would glare at them and they would be silent. Then they, too, would get a niblet of sandwich.

Finn got in on the fun so much that one dog sat next to him while the other sat next to Tearlach. That only changed when Finn leaned back in his seat, patting his very full stomach while Tearlach made himself a second sandwich. Both dogs went to their master then, knowing there was no more food forthcoming from Finn.

"You're giving up now, little one?" Tearlach guffawed.

"For right now, I am," Finn said. "We're supposed to have quite a dinner tonight after the King of Bolan arrives."

"Fah! I have heard of him. He is a prissy man with buffed nails and soft hands. He does nothing for himself. He doesn't even wipe his own ass," Tearlach scoffed.

Finn really hadn't needed that image in his head. "Well, Rohan is having the staff put together quite a feast so I want to save room for that."

"These sandwiches are hardly appetizers!" Tearlach amused himself. "So! Now that your mouth is not full of food, you can talk. What do you want to say?"

Finn wetted his lips. How to begin? He thought of twenty carefully-crafted ways he could explain all that had happened with Tearlach, but he rejected every single one of them. Because they all felt like lies.

"You saved Rohan and Thalanil's lives today. More than theirs. So many more," Finn said, recalling Rohan's description of the world in the future where his father and lover were dead.

Tearlach's forehead bunched. "You hardly needed me today. You took out all the truly challenging predators!"

"Yes, but only because you gave me this." Finn extended an arm to the side and *willed* the staff to his hand.

And it was suddenly *there*. He closed his hand around the smooth, silky wood. The red crystal glittered at the top of it as he lightly spun the staff in one hand. Tearlach looked at the staff and grunted.

"Pretty, but I do not recall giving you a stick," he said and swallowed.

"It's the staff the Necromancer used to command the Dreadbrood," Finn answered. "Its name is

Atheve."

He wasn't sure how he knew that. The Necromancer had not named it, or not told him it had a name, but it was there on the tip of his tongue, tasting like blood and ashes.

"Ah, death! Atheve means death. But I thought you knew no Achuvien!" Tearlach's voice was still filled with warmth, but his eyes were wary.

"I guess I know one word," Finn admitted.

"Yet I still do not recall giving you this Atheve."

"Because you did so in a former life," Finn answered. He let out a long breath and explained what had happened with the time rifts in the Remnant, the tower and finding the Necromancer. He ended by explaining how the Necromancer, upon hearing he had been reborn as a king, had tossed the staff to Finn to essentially raise the hells. "I realize what I've told you is probably not believable considering–"

"I believe you," Tearlach cut him off.

Finn blinked. "You do? But you told me everything about the Dreadbrood, the Necromancer, and the God of Death were all myths!"

Tearlach shrugged. "You're not lying. I don't think you hit your head. I have seen what you can do with that." He pointed at the staff. "And it would explain some things."

Tearlach stared out the window. Finn didn't think he was gazing at the blue skies or relishing the summer sunshine. He seemed lost in thought. Finn said nothing as Tearlach clearly thought about matters. Finally, he turned back to Finn and thumped the table with one hand. The cutlery jumped as did the dogs who had curled up by the fire. But realizing that there were no enemies nearby or food to snarfle, they went back to bed.

"We are connected, you and I. Practically *kin*," Tearlach said.

After a moment, Finn nodded. "Yes, I think that's accurate."

"You are Death's Chosen and the people of Achuvia are the God of Death's people," Tearlach said.

Another nod. "I am wondering if the Dreadbrood–before they were stored here–existed beneath Achuvia. It would explain the harsh living conditions there."

"It is still hard," Tearlach said with a wave of his hand. "The Dreadbrood could hardly make it worse whereas here… here it is causing havoc."

"It is. But perhaps there is a reason for that," Finn said. "A reason it is here."

"According to me in the past, it is here for you to kill everyone," Tearlach said.

Finn flinched.

"Ach, little one, you are not made for such things!" Tearlach shook his head violently. "If the God of Death *truly* wanted someone to lay waste to it all, it would have chosen someone like Marikoth! But it did not. So that tells me that you and Rohan are right. That there is an alternative option."

"I just don't understand why the God of Death won't just come out and tell me that!" Finn let out a disgusted sigh. "It hints and dances about, but it doesn't just spell it out."

"Because it is a *god*, Finrael. It needs to amuse itself by driving us all crazy." Tearlach waved off the very idea of a god being rational.

"The Dreadbrood would be the one army that Marikoth could not win against. Any army of the living, he would simply use them as fuel," Finn explained. "But the Dreadbrood is not drainable. It would poison him to try. I think that's partly why he was experimenting with the undead. Both to use as an army of his own, but also to see if he could face off against the Dreadbrood."

Tearlach stroked his pale chin. "Indeed. He could drain his own people, but I am betting an army

of monsters can move faster than even the Fae. And they would be fleeing him as well so, yes, I think that the Dreadbrood is the solution to fight him."

"It is. But currently I do not know how to wake the Dreadbrood." Finn grimaced. "Or even know how to get to them. They are in a cavern far beneath the surface of the earth just beyond the catacombs."

"That is what you were looking for the other day in the tomb! A way to your dead army," Tearlach realized.

"Yes, I imagine there must be a connection between the crypt and the cavern," Finn said. He stroked the staff. "The staff plays some role in this."

"But you do not know how to use it?" Tearlach confirmed.

"I know how to drain things with it, but, otherwise, no, you are correct," Finn admitted.

Tearlach tapped his chin. "Then I must read this book you gave me and others as well. I can go faster than those scholars who are pausing after every word!"

Finn smiled. "I'm sure you can."

"Perhaps there will be answers in them," Tearlach sighed. But then his eyes sharpened on Finn again. "You know, this all means that Hugues is right about you. You are not a Death Mage. You are something else altogether."

"I know. But Rohan understands all of this and more. So Hugues' fears have no power over me," Finn explained.

"It is good that you are truthful with one another. Always be so," Tearlach advised. "Distrust is poison that can destroy anything, even a love as sweet as yours."

"I agree. It's partially why I decided to tell you everything, even though I was worried it would upset you." Finn looked down into his lap.

"Upset me? Why?"

"You are the Necromancer, or you *were* the Necromancer, and things went so badly for you," Finn admitted. "I know you don't like to lose."

"I have won too many battles since then to care," Tearlach snorted. "Besides, I think I would have won that one too, but the God of Death didn't really want me to succeed. So there we are!"

"I'm glad you're not upset. And the–the staff? It is yours really." Finn touched it awkwardly. "Though it might be dangerous to you, but–"

"I have my sword." Tearlach caressed the hilt of his magical, flaming sword. "I need no *stick*. So Atheve is yours truly. As it was always meant to be."

Finn curled his hand tighter around it. "Thank you."

"No thanks required. Not yet anyway," he said as he began to chomp down on his sandwich again. "We should discuss what you will do for the people of Achuvia."

Finn blinked. "What I will do? Anything I can, but, right now, Rirea has less than your people do. Until we fix things with Rirea and the rest of the old Empire I'm uncertain I have anything to offer at all."

"Explain to me what will happen once you defeat Marikoth," Tearlach said.

"You make it sound so easy. There is so much–"

"It will not be easy, but you will do it. Too much depends upon you doing it," Tearlach said as he took a swallow of wine.

"All right, let's say we defeat Marikoth, then in order to restore the land in Rirea, Bolan and Sultane and stop the overgrowth in the Empire all of them must be consolidated under Rohan and my… rule," Finn explained awkwardly.

There was a snort. “Oh! Have you told good Queen Artremaya that yet?”

“No.”

“I’m sure not! She would not be so eager to be your friend if she knew. When do you intend on telling her and the prissy King of Bolan?” Tearlach asked.

“Sometime soon,” Finn admitted. “Maybe tonight.”

Tearlach rocked in his chair as he clearly imagined how “well” this would go.

“Your laughter is not helping.” Finn crossed his arms over his chest. “Tearlach, as you pointed out, we’re kin. You should be helping me.”

“I’ll help you by pledging my sword to keep theirs from your and Rohan’s throats tonight! But I do not know some way to make them come around to giving up their kingdoms to you without a fight, bloody or not,” Tearlach said.

Finn’s shoulders slumped. “You’re probably right. Rohan and I might be willing to give up our rule, but we can’t expect others to.”

“You’re being *forced* to take over the Aeturnal Empire, which is more than what you came in with!” Tearlach reminded him, sounding almost jolly.

“Fair enough. But it’s necessary for the land to heal and for it to continue to be sustained. There’s a connection between Rohan and the Empire. I don’t know if you noticed how the creatures behaved after I thinned many of them. Those trees in the courtyard are Ostils, the walking creatures?” Finn explained.

“Impressive! I believe you! But, then again, you are not asking me to cede Achuvia to you,” Tearlach pointed out. “So what I think is immaterial.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

“Does he truly have to rule over the land? That is what I would ask if I were Artremaya or the King of Bolan. Why can he not just sustain the land *without* ruling it?” Tearlach asked.

“That’s a good question, but the only answer I have is that it doesn’t work that way. He must rule in order for it to fully be sustained,” Finn answered, feeling that was true deep in his gut.

“But he has not done such a good job here,” Tearlach pointed out.

“Only because I wasn’t with him. His magical power restores incredibly slowly without my assistance. But with my help, he can access a network of power stones and flow power through them. At least that’s the theory,” Finn explained.

“Oh, they will *definitely* give over their lands to you both on a *theory*,” Tearlach chortled.

Finn narrowed his eyes at him again. “Well, the thing is that they must! There’s no other choice or their lands will become like Rirea! The Dreadbrood are what’s accelerating the dysfunction here, but it will spread everywhere.”

Tearlach held up his hands as if in surrender. “Again, I believe you.”

“But you aren’t giving up your kingdom,” Finn repeated his earlier argument.

“Indeed, I am not. But to go back to my earlier question about how you will assist Achuvia,” Tearlach said with an almost mischievous smile. “When you are *done* with the Dreadbrood, bringing it back to Rirea sounds unwise.”

“It would be. The army might drain much of the power before it flows further afield,” Finn realized.

“Indeed. So perhaps it makes sense to *restore* the Dreadbrood to the place where it belongs,” Tearlach suggested.

“You mean Achuvia?” Finn’s eyes widened. “But, Tearlach, you know the Dreadbrood drains life!”

"Achuvia has not become a lush paradise since the army has been gone," Tearlach answered. "It is just as bleak as it always has been. There is truly nothing that can be harmed by having the Dreadbrood returned."

"But your people…" Finn stopped. "You don't make enough food to keep them from starving now, do you?"

"Far from it. And foodstuffs are our greatest cost. We must fight to get them and my people suffer regardless." Tearlach was no longer smiling or chuckling. "It cannot go on."

"No, it can't," Finn agreed.

"You may not have anything to share with Achuvia *now*, but when you and Rohan rule…" Tearlach left the sentence hanging.

"You will house the Dreadbrood so long as we keep you and your people supplied with food?" Finn articulated the offer.

Tearlach spread his arms. "Indeed. I couldn't have said it better myself!"

"Even if you were not to take the Dreadbrood, Tearlach, I would not allow Achuvia to suffer," Finn told him. "It is my homeland in some way too."

Tearlach let out a bark of laughter and tipped his head back. "Oh, my kin, I must *save* you from your goodness! That will be my greatest gift to you!"

"I just did not want you to take on yet more of a burden–"

"Stop!" Tearlach was practically rolling with laughter. "We will take the Dreadbrood! You will support us! I do not even need to wait until you talk to Rohan about it. But I will. I do not wish to cause friction between you. So I will pretend you have not been so generous and will wait until your official answer once you speak with Rohan."

"I appreciate that, Tearlach," Finn said dryly, though he realized that Tearlach was right and it was a generous offer in and of itself.

"Where is good King Rohan now?" Tearlach asked.

"With my father. They're training."

There was a clattering of horses' hooves outside. Finn went to the window and saw a line of very elaborate horses and carriages pulling up into the courtyard.

"It looks like the King of Bolan is here," Finn said, his stomach falling.

Tearlach laughed. "Ah, now the games begin!"

DAY ONE

Rohan slammed into the ground on his back. All the air left his lungs in a huge burst and he had a too long moment fearing he wouldn't be able to draw in another breath to replace it. Everything hurt and he was coated in dust and gravel.

More reason to ask Finn for another bath tonight, he thought faintly. *Last night was completely wonderful. But I'm not sure I'll be able to move much tonight. Maybe a lot of hot water will help. And Finn. Finn's hand on my back. Finn's hands–*

"You would do better to think on the control of your *magic*, Rohan, than my son," Thalanil said almost sweetly.

The Fae had just thumped him so Rohan supposed he had the right to be pleased with himself. Revenge enough for wanting the Fae prince always and forever.

"How did you know I was thinking of Finn?" Rohan asked. "Can you read my mind?"

"I could, but I do not need to," Thalanil answered.

"Why?"

Rohan saw the Fae king's feet come into view. He glanced up. Thalanil–looking beautiful and immaculate as always, in icy blue no less–was staring down at him with those red eyes. He was smiling too as if seeing Rohan flat on his back, completely conquered, was one of the best things in life.

"Because you are always thinking of my son," Thalanil stated simply.

Rohan chuckled. "Okay, you got me there."

"Indeed, I do. I suppose that should please me. To know that the man who would woo and wed my son thinks of little else but him."

Thalanil's arms were crossed at the wrists behind his back. He did bring one around to offer Rohan a lift up after a moment. Rohan gratefully took it, groaning as every bone in his body was rattled by Thalanil's earlier attack.

"Does it? Please you?" Rohan asked, groaning softly.

"I am working on it," Thalanil admitted.

"Honesty, that's good. I think," Rohan said.

"You are an honorable man, Rohan. No one could doubt your bravery or nobility. I see how people react to you. The very creatures from my… *our* lands listen to you as they never have the Ravenspars alone," Thalanil said with a graceful gesture towards another grouping of Ostils that were blooming in a nearby walled garden. They could just see the tops of them swaying in the breeze.

"That all sounds good. Yet there is clearly a *but* in there," Rohan said.

"No, no, there isn't. There is an *unless*," Thalanil stated.

"An *unless*?" Rohan tilted his head to the side.

"A shield's purpose is to absorb the magic I'm sending at you, but you absorbed it instead," Thalanil pointed out, avoiding answering the question. "Well, you didn't absorb all of it. You let the majority of it hit you and then deflect off."

He frowned as he took in the scorch marks on the front of Rohan's white shirt. Rohan grimaced. He liked this shirt. He wasn't sure that even his impeccable servants could save it.

"Yes, yes, I'm quite well aware of what happened."

Thalanil had shown Rohan how to make a simple magical shield to block the bolt of plasma he sent Rohan's way. The moment the plasma had gotten near him though, his shield had failed and the plasma had hit him full on.

Rohan dusted off as much of the dirt as he could. "Yes, well, my whole experience with magic has been absorbing it or sending it out of me. This idea of blocking it seems the antithesis of that. Almost unnatural."

"You are not a power stone, Rohan. At least, not *just* a power stone," Thalanil amended. "Shall we try again?"

"By that you mean we *will* try again but I like how you make it seem like I have a choice in the matter," Rohan remarked.

"You wish to learn magic so this is the only way." Thalanil merely smiled placidly. "Brace yourself."

Rohan nodded. He braced himself physically with his legs shoulder-width apart and arms outstretched as if he were going to grapple with someone. But instead of physically touching anyone, blue light appeared at the tips of his fingers. Rohan willed the light to flow outwards, first connecting between his fingers, then over his palm and then, finally, spreading beyond his hands to fill the air as tall and as wide as he was.

"You formed that much more quickly than before," Thalanil remarked.

Rohan grinned, but he was grinning at a plasma bolt that completely obscured Thalanil's face. The shield vanished and the bolt had him flying backwards again. Again, the breath was knocked out from him and his head was ringing.

"Rohan, you absorbed it again instead of blocking," Thalanil remarked.

"I did," Rohan coughed out. He rolled onto his side and curled up. "Oh, by the gods, I don't think I can take another hit. You did say those were *gentle* bolts, yes?"

"Hardly any power was used," Thalanil assured him.

Rohan groaned. "I'm glad you said we shouldn't have an audience. I don't know if I'd ever live this down. Serxio and Leonid would be convinced I have a death wish and they would try to protect me more than usual."

They were in the sword training circle at Reave Castle. This usually was a place where he knew exactly what he was doing. He was often surrounded by dozens of training partners and he took them all down. Now, he was the only thing going down.

Again and again and again.

"I don't understand. The moment I see the bolt it's like I lose the ability to keep the shield up. It's as if it doesn't want to protect me from the magic," Rohan wailed. Yes, he wailed. Thalanil gave him a hand up again. "Are you sure this is something I can actually *do*?"

He saw Silver Soul's head hanging over the edge of the tower she'd taken as her roost. He swore that she was laughing at him. A wyvern! Laughing! Really!

"Of course, you can. You are an Aeturnal," Thalanil said. "And you've demonstrated you can use

magic many, many times, including when you formed the shields you can't seem to hold."

"Okay, well, that's something. It's just when I took to the sword as a boy it seemed easier than this," Rohan admitted.

"Memory is imperfect and you are *still* a boy in Fae terms," Thalanil explained.

"But I'm a man in human ones. And maybe too old a man to learn new tricks," Rohan muttered the last.

"You are twenty-eight, Rohan. That is quite absurd even for a mortal to say," Thalanil retorted. "I told you that magic will take thousands of years to master. Sometimes even longer than that. And this is *day one*."

"Day one?" Rohan repeated. Then with a sigh he said with more faith, "Day one."

"You formed a shield. An infant could do this, but you have had no instruction so it is a win," Thalanil said.

"An infant?" Rohan crooked an eyebrow.

"Rather. My mother claimed I made shields in my crib three days after I was born," Thalanil informed him with no small amount of pride.

The way Silver Soul's head was moving, she was *definitely* laughing at him now.

"So you were a prodigy and I'm a late bloomer?" Rohan guessed.

"Your human blood is not helping you, I'm sure. But the Aeturnal blood is pushing to the fore," Thalanil assured him.

"I like my human blood, Thalanil. Most of the people I know are human and they are wonderful," Rohan reminded him.

"We shall see," Thalanil said. "Now… *brace*."

Thalanil didn't even give him time to get the shield up before Rohan was pummeled by *two* plasma bolts. One of them hit his ass and sent him soaring upwards while another hit his chest, which went him slamming downwards. He gasped and groaned. Thalanil leaned over him.

"I softened your landing," the Fae king informed him.

Rohan just groaned and waved off the hand that was offered. "I need to just lay here for a minute."

"As you wish."

Thalanil slowly walked the sword circle. His chin was lifted as he inspected the new vines and freshly restored stone on Reave Castle. Now when he and Finn made love, it wasn't just the flora and fauna that gained the benefit, but the castle itself. Cracks and seams that had formed were now healing. Rohan could swear that one of the tumbled-down follies was not as crumbling any longer. Almost as if it was being rebuilt. Perhaps if he concentrated on that before Finn and he made love, the power might flow there. But that was near the field where the Dreadbrood slept.

And he didn't want to send any power their way.

Not until Finn knew how to control them. He hoped Finn's meeting with Tearlach was going well.

"You're thinking of my son again," Thalanil said.

"He's meeting with Tearlach," Rohan said.

Thalanil paused in his walking. "To tell him of what you both saw in the time rifts?"

Rohan nodded. He was capable of sitting up now, but he wasn't quite ready to stand.

"What does he hope to achieve with such a revelation?" Thalanil asked.

"Finn feels responsible for him. Somehow," Rohan answered. "Finn believes if he can win Tearlach's friendship that things will work out."

"That sounds like my son," Thalanil said with a soft huff of laughter.

"Finn is an optimist. A believer in the better natures of people. I am, too," Rohan admitted.

"And it does inspire," Thalanil admitted, which surprised Rohan. "But you do realize that most rulers aren't like that, don't you? They can't be inspired to give up their lands."

"Maybe they can be. Artremaya seems like a fine, logical person."

"She will not seem so for long when you ask her to give up lands that have been in her family for generations," Thalanil scoffed. "She believes in her right to rule, too, you know? She believes she's been destined as well."

"Maybe she has, but this is real. What Finn and I have to do is real," Rohan pointed out. "You know that, don't you?"

"Do you not have courtiers who are skilled in diplomacy?" Thalanil abruptly asked.

Rohan winced. "My uncle used to handle all of that. But, clearly, I'm not… Well, he's not any longer. And there hasn't been time to arrange all of it."

"You don't know who to trust," Thalanil stated rather than asked.

Rohan nodded. "But, as I said, inspiration aside, I think speaking leader to leader may be best in this case, especially considering what we have to tell them."

"That they need to hand over their lands to you and Finrael?" Thalanil's voice did not hold any disbelieving tone, but Rohan's shoulders tightened hearing it so baldly stated.

"They have to be made to understand that it's the only way to save their lands and their people," Rohan said.

"You *believe* it to be the only way, but we don't actually know," Thalanil pointed out.

But Rohan shook his head. "I *know* it. When I interacted with the power stones, I could feel all of them out there, calling to me, but I couldn't reach those in the other lands. It felt like there were walls shutting me off from them."

"And you believe that restoring the Empire will rid you of those walls?"

Rohan nodded. "When the people turn to Finn and I, there will be a–a *resonance*." Rohan made a movement with his hands as if he were hefting something physical before them. "I just *know* that will happen. Tapping into the system has changed me. I feel different than I did."

"Yes, I can tell."

Thalanil was walking again. A slow, unhurried pace that would eat up miles without tiring him if he wasn't walking in a circle. Rohan imagined that was how the Fae lived. They just kept going because they knew how to be in the moment, in the past and yet in the future too. When he watched Thalanil, he almost felt like he could quantify the difference between mortal and immortal.

"Brace!"

Rohan didn't even have a chance to shout his surprise as another bolt came his way. This one left him with his hair standing on end and flat on his back once more.

"I am sorry. I thought that giving you *less* time to prepare might allow your natural instincts to take over," Thalanil said.

"No," Rohan coughed. "No, apparently not."

"There is something missing here," Thalanil muttered. "I can see the power rising in you and then it retreats."

"Yes, yes, that's accurate," Rohan grimaced.

"It's almost as if…" Thalanil did not finish his thought. He just ended up shaking his head.

"Maybe if you let me go on the offensive, I could do something," Rohan suggested.

He imagined sending Thalanil pitching ass over head. Now *that* would be something to see for a change. But then he thought about the true damage he'd been able to do with a blast from Lightbringer. Things just turned to ash. Unlike Thalanil, he didn't have enough control to do that.

"We could try that–"

"No, we can't. I was foolish to suggest it," Rohan said firmly. "I can destroy things quite well. I have none of the fine control like you do to do less damage."

Thalanil was facing the Wall. His expression was grim. "There are many reasons to regret not having access to the Empire, but one of them is not having access to materials about the Aeturnals."

"Is anything actually there anymore? Ryleth said it was all outlawed and destroyed," Rohan pointed out. "The material below has far more information on the Aeturnals than the grand libraries do any longer, I'd guess."

"That is true. But my father's…" Thalanil paused and swallowed. Speaking of his father was still painful, of course. Rohan hadn't been able to speak of his parents without a thick throat for ages. "My father would have had things in his library at Norbreask. If Marikoth hasn't burned it all down."

Rohan nodded. "I worry about what he's doing in there."

"Yes." Thalanil looked bleak.

"Finn hopes that talking to Tearlach may also jog some psychic memory in him," Rohan said. "He knew how to control the Dreadbrood. Finn hopes he might remember something about it. Though I don't know why the God of Death won't just tell him."

Thalanil turned to him, expression shocked. "The God of Death speaks to Finrael?"

"Has he ever told you about the raven?"

Thalanil nodded. "Yes, so it is an avatar of the god?"

"Something like that. Well, it speaks to Finn often, but in riddles, half-truths, and the like. Not do this and it'll break the curse. Even though that would be a better path to getting things done the way it wants them," Rohan muttered.

"Does not the God of Death want the destruction of everything?"

"No, I don't think so. Like all gods, it wants to be worshiped. If we're all dead and gone there's no one left to bow and scrape or set out the flowers and other offerings," Rohan shrugged. "There's a way forward, it just wants us to figure it out."

"It probably thinks that its desires are clear as crystal," Thalanil murmured. "But it thinks like a god while we do not." This seemed to trigger some more thoughtfulness in the Fae king and his gaze was distant for a little while before it sharpened on Rohan again. "When you were taught the sword, bow and shield, what was your purpose then?"

"To be able to defend myself," Rohan answered with another shrug.

"No."

"No?" Rohan lifted an eyebrow.

"It had to be more than that." Thalanil circled him. "It was to defend yourself, but I am certain that your main overwhelming desire was to learn so that others didn't have to put themselves in harm's way to keep you safe."

Rohan nodded slowly. "There are so many who would give their lives to keep mine safe when theirs are just as precious, if not more so. I needed to make sure my skills made the need for protection as small as possible."

Thalanil tapped his chin. "And you thought that if you got very good at these skills that you could not only keep yourself safe and others safe around you, because they wouldn't have to defend you, but also because–"

"I could defend them as well, yes," Rohan agreed. "I do have that in mind when I'm practicing magic, Thalanil. I realize that if I can master these gifts then–"

"No."

"No, again?" Rohan blinked at him.

"Magic isn't a gift. It is an integral part of being a Fae. It is *who* you are. It is like breathing. There is *nothing* without magic," Thalanil disagreed.

Rohan shrugged once more. "Perhaps it is the human in me. Magic still feels a little distant. Maybe a lot distant."

"It's because you're holding onto your humanity," Thalanil guessed. "You believe it's special."

"I know it is. You might not see it–"

"You cannot keep it close, Rohan. For Finrael's sake, you must let it go," Thalanil interrupted him. "Your humanity is holding you back. Not just from your magic, but from many, important things about what it means to be Fae."

"I don't see why I can't value both."

"You don't value both. You think you're human and the Fae blood that runs in you is some kind of afterthought, if at all, like how your eyes are blue and your hair is blonde," Thalanil said with a wave. "You don't really think of yourself as Fae at all, do you?"

Rohan shifted from foot to foot. "Maybe… No, you're right. I don't, but like I said I've started to feel different."

"Did you embrace that feeling? Or did you run away from it?" Those keen red eyes were upon him.

Rohan swallowed. "I pushed it away."

"Yes, but you can't do that anymore. You have to reach for it. Being Fae is what's going to restore the land and defeat my brother. Being *human*–"

"Won't." Rohan grimaced. "You're asking me to give up a part of myself–"

"That will give up on you. Rohan, if you don't actively start thinking differently, you'll be just human. And whatever wonderful things there are about that? They won't make Finrael a good husband. Because, outside of this war and the land, you–"

"Will age and die while Finn–"

"Stays young forever. Will you condemn him to a life alone?" Thalanil asked.

Rohan drew a hand over his eyes as he realized what Thalanil was saying. Holding onto himself–this idea of himself–was going to cause Finn nothing but pain and loss. And, in the end, he would do anything for Finn.

Anything.

"No, no, I won't allow that. I would never do that to him," Rohan murmured.

Of course, Rohan's mind flashed to that other future. If the thought of causing Finn pain wasn't enough, that reminded him how much pain others would feel if he were not here.

"Then you must delve deep into your magic, Rohan. You must find the Aeturnal inside of you and embrace him. Hold him as tight as you can until you squeeze everything else out," Thalanil informed him.

A glance up at Silver Soul showed that she wasn't laughing any more. Thalanil had spoken the truth. It was time to stop being *just* the King of Rirea and start being the Aeturnal Heir.

A worthy partner for my beloved Finn.

"Maeve had Fae blood, did she not?" Rohan asked.

Thalanil went very still. "Yes, she did."

"Couldn't she have embraced her Fae blood and become immortal too?" Rohan asked.

Thalanil said nothing for a very long time. "Perhaps, but we did not attempt it. I was going to ask her to try, but time got away from us."

Time getting away from a Fae… yes, I could see that.

"And after realizing what Finrael was, she knew that life eternal–even a normal human lifespan–was not to be hers," Thalanil answered stiffly. Then he let out a breath and said, "My greatest regret–one of many, many regrets–is that I did not give all of myself to her. Mortal or no. Life of a candle flame in a strong storm or an eternal light. I would do anything to be the person she and Finrael needed for however long I could have had with her. Just a minute more in her presence…"

Rohan's throat grew tight as he saw the myriad of emotions cross over Thalanil's face. His love for Finn rose up inside of him like a tide. It was his decision to be a candle flame or an eternal light. It was his decision whether he embraced immortality or not. For Finn, he could do anything.

"Hit me again," Rohan said as he got to his feet. "And don't hold back."

"Rohan, that is unwise," Thalanil began. "It is but your first day–"

"Trust me."

"Form your shield."

"Trust me," Rohan repeated as he reached inside of himself to the knowledge that seemed to be just waiting for him there.

Frowning, Thalanil muttered, "Finrael will be upset with me if I mark you."

"Do it, Thalanil!"

Thalanil released a plasma bolt that was bigger and hotter than anything he'd thrown before. Time seemed to slow down. Rohan smiled. He didn't form a shield. He didn't try to save himself from this magic at all. He heard Thalanil shout for him to *BRACE*! But instead he opened his arms wide and the magic flowed harmlessly around him. Its spit and hiss became a rhythmic almost purring. It encircled his body with purple light. Rohan lifted up a hand and the magic danced upon his palm. He petted it and it purred more.

The run-down stable was before him. It really needed some work. They'd stopped using this part of it because there were so many repairs to be done. Rohan sent the magic out towards the stable, picturing it in his mind as he wanted it to look, and the magic leaped to do his bidding. The stable's stones were no longer chipped. The roof no longer sagged. The beams were straight and strong. The stone floor was smooth and level. It looked practically brand new. Rohan couldn't believe it. He felt connected to every single molecule of this place. And not just this place. He could sense other structures, greater structures, calling to him, wanting him to build them and shape them and repair them, too and he…

And then he pitched forward.

Thalanil was there to catch him. The Fae king's expression was one of awe. "You used more magic than I gave you, Rohan. A lot more."

Rohan gasped. "I felt it. The whole of it. The Empire."

"I know," Thalanil sounded amazed. "It was crying out for you. It needs the Aeturnal Heir and you answered that you have returned."

THE KING OF BOLAN

Finn clattered outside to meet the King of Bolan with Tearlach lazily following after him. The dogs kept racing ahead of them both, waiting for them to catch up with wagging tails and lolling tongues, before racing ahead again. So the first responders to the King of Bolan's visit were dogs. They burst out of Reave Castle into the courtyard, barking and circling the ornate orange carriage that was encrusted with silver and gems. Finn blinked when he saw it.

"Now *that* is a traveling reason to turn to thievery," Tearlach muttered.

Finn rather agreed with him. He couldn't imagine riding out in such an ostentatious carriage when there were people under one's rule who didn't have enough to eat or clothes to keep them warm or a solid roof over their heads. And it wasn't just the *one* carriage that held the king, but *every* carriage was overwrought with splendor.

And armed guards.

The carriages bristled with guards armed to the teeth with long curved blades and powerful-looking crossbows that appeared to shoot multiple rounds at one time. From the blackened tips of the bolts, Finn guessed that they were poisoned too.

Not a nice way to die. Even if you survive a shot, you will pass away afterwards, your blood turning to acid.

Servants covered in silks and velvets–all bright colors that Serxio would undoubtedly covet–hurried over to the king's carriage. A set of steps was deployed from the carriage itself, but they busied themselves laying out an elaborate and beautiful carpet at the base of the steps.

It looked to be silk with colors as vibrant as the sun. Burnt umbers, golden yellows, brassy bronzes and more formed bird designs and masses of wild foliage along the carpet that led from the edge of the carriage to the top of the stairs of Reave Castle. Finn had to step aside for the servants to neatly unroll it and use weights to make it lay smoothly on the steps. Finn did not step back onto the carpet as his boots might have been a little muddy.

Where is Rohan? Finn wondered as the door of the carriage was opened. *I felt a wash of power earlier. He must be working very hard with Father on his magic. So it's up to me to greet the king.*

He nervously ran his free hand down the front of his green and silver tunic that hugged his slender form. There were silver ravens embroidered tastefully along the collar at his throat and his black leggings and boots were finely fitted to his legs and feet. But he felt under-dressed compared to the Bolanian servants, let alone whatever their king would be wearing.

Tearlach was picking his teeth with a piece of bone. He spat on the ground as he dislodged something that he decided not to swallow. Finn was certain that Tearlach was upping the ante of his coarseness in reaction to the King of Bolan's supposed fussiness.

A small, lithe man, a few inches shorter than Finn appeared in the doorway of the carriage. Or, at least, he *would* have been shorter than Finn, but there was an orange silk headdress that added six inches of height to him. It was adorned with pearls, diamonds, emeralds and rubies. He was swathed from head to toe in a snowy white cloak–undoubtedly, the skin of some beast from the mountains considering the thick fur–that flowed from his neck to his toes. But Finn did get to see that he wore more orange underneath–leggings, long tunic, red belt, jewel-encrusted everything–as he lightly exited the carriage.

The King of Bolan's skin was the color of a burnished nut. He had intelligent black eyes, a broad nose, and rather surprisingly thin lips surrounded by a salt-and pepper goatee where the edges of his mustache were oiled and waxed into points. Those points lifted in a smile as he scanned the people around him. His eyes alighted on Finn and he blinked.

"I dare say, King Rohan, I *did* believe you were bigger," the King of Bolan said in a rather high-pitched register. "But perhaps it's like with dogs. They may have big paws when they are puppies, but they might not grow into large beasts in the end. I think you were about five years old when I saw you last."

"Bigger? Oh, no, I'm not Rohan!" Finn waved his hands in front of him.

"Don't you think Rohan is *dead*?" Tearlach asked.

Of course, the King of Bolan *should* think that. Hugues had been the one to contact him as king due to his nephew's unfortunate and early death. But the Bolanian king did not appear to think that at all. Instead, he was looking carefully at Finn.

"I don't believe everything I read," King Nafi of Bolan answered simply.

"You're wise not to," Finn said. "Rohan is very much alive."

He might be dressed like a fool, but I don't think he is one. Not at all. How will we convince someone like him to accept our rule?

"I have to admit I am not certain who *you* are though. If you're not Rohan then…" The Bolanian king spread his hands wide as if he were pulling back a curtain from a stage that Finn was standing on.

"I'm–"

He didn't get to finish as Hugues' voice rose up from the doorway, "King Nafi! It is so good to see you! Forgive Rohan for not being here to greet you himself, but he is, ah, indisposed for the moment."

He won't tell King Nafi about Rohan's magic! But I know that he is pleased that Rohan is the Heir of House Aeturnal. Does King Nafi have a prejudice against magic users or Fae?

King Nafi's black eyes slid right from Finn to Hugues who stood on the top step in the De Clare's red and gold robes. He lightly came down the stairs, giving a formal bow, before taking the King of Bolan's hands in his in a warm shake. They were clearly old friends.

"It is so good to see you, Hugues! It has been too long! I am sorry that it was something so dire as to bring us together again," Nafi said with more evident warmth for Rohan's uncle.

Finn's one hand tightened on the staff while his other curled into a fist. His gaze met Tearlach, who was gazing at him speculatively as if he wondered if Finn was going to put up with this. This was a test of some sort. He knew that if he let Hugues play host that this would be a loss and not just for him, but for *Rohan*. He couldn't allow that. His usual reticence had to be set aside.

"Lord De Clare," Finn said in a voice he hardly recognized as his own. It was filled with command and a touch of darkness. Both Nafi and Hugues stilled. "Go find Rohan, won't you? I believe he is…" Finn sensed his lover not too far away, but his life force was slightly fainter than it

should be. His father's life force bloomed like the sun though. So he knew that Rohan wasn't in any danger. Just tired after a long time training, "in the training circle. I will take care of King Nafi."

Slowly, Hugues turned towards Finn. His lips were open–about to protest, no doubt–but upon seeing Finn's face he took a step back. Finn swallowed the unease he felt that anyone would see him and retreat, but Hugues had to learn his place.

And King Nafi has to learn mine.

"I'm sorry, young man, but if you *aren't* Rohan then who are you?" Nafi repeated.

Finn was not the one who answered that. It was Tearlach, "He is Prince Finrael Ravenspar, Crown Prince of the Empire of the Eclipse Throne, Death's Chosen, and my cousin."

Finn blinked. The way that Tearlach used his titles seemed to make them both more and less ominous in Finn's mind. Not something to hide, but something he *was*. Something people should know and respect, but also fear. And Hugues was demonstrating the latter.

Hugues' mouth had fallen open farther at the title of "Death's Chosen." His eyes were huge. And a rather waxy appearance had taken over his skin. He had read that one book, after all, about the Death's Chosen. He might have *some* idea what the Death's Chosen was and what he could do.

Be afraid of me, Hugues. So long as that makes you compliant, I don't care.

"Run along, Hugues, and do as the prince asks or he might show you what his new staff can do," Tearlach snorted and spat.

"Of–of course, I will get the–the king, Prince Finrael," Hugues said and twitched, but finally he lowered his head to Finn.

"We shall have to catch up later, Hugues! Once you have done what the good prince here requires," Nafi said with another speculative look in his eyes.

I was right to do that. I have King Nafi's respect now. He knows that Hugues is below me in the pecking order. I wonder, though, if Hugues will let that go.

"Indeed, I shall look forward to it, King Nafi," Hugues said.

Then he spun on his heel to head in Rohan's direction. Finn almost wanted to follow after him. He truly wanted to see, speak to and touch Rohan. But he had to attend to his duties. Rohan was all right. He knew he was. He could feel his strong life force. He was all right. And he had a duty here. He turned back to Nafi, who was watching all of this with narrowed eyes.

"What in the hells happened to the stables?" Tearlach asked, gazing at the very new and beautiful stables that had *not* been there that morning. "Those weren't there when we came, were they? No way I would miss them!"

"No, they weren't," Finn agreed. "Rohan must have made them."

Which was amazing! More than amazing. The stable master and the horses appeared stunned by the new stables themselves. The stable master was circling the outside of it and pointing at things. The new stable was more exciting than the arrival of the King of Bolan.

"While impressive, I'm not sure how building a new stable will help us defeat Marikoth," Tearlach said with a snort. "Unless he creates it on *top* of Marikoth."

"Are you saying that King Rohan made these stables… magically?" Nafi asked.

"It's really the least of what he can do," Finn answered.

"Least?" Nafi's eyebrows drew together.

"It's one of many things we have to tell you," Finn said.

Nafi turned fully back to him. "I find myself intrigued more now than I was when I received Hugues' note."

"King Nafi, we're so pleased that you could come to Rirea and hope to intrigue you even more,"

Finn said in what he hoped was a warm, but formal tone to obscure the fact that he had spent more of his life as a servant than a royal. "King Rohan is training with my father. He'll join us when he can. Let me be your guide."

Finn bowed his head, but not the rest of his body, realizing that his father never bowed more than that. It was an acknowledgment–polite, but not in any way ceding ground to the other man–which was more than enough. Tearlach appeared to be chortling to himself.

"Those are quite a bit of interesting titles you have, Prince Finrael," Nafi said, stroking his goatee.

"Tearlach and I being cousins must be the one that's surprising you. Of course, you must know King Tearlach of Achuvia?" Finn gestured to the big man.

"Yes, I believe we met once." Nafi's mouth screwed up in distaste as Tearlach was picking his teeth with that bone again. "You two don't look much alike. Must be a very *tenuous* family relationship."

"He's my very good friend and an incredibly brave and able warrior with natural leadership ability," Finn said.

Tearlach put an arm around Finn's shoulders. "You would think with all these compliments that Finrael likes me more than my Rohan, but no, his heart is taken."

Finn narrowed his eyes at Tearlach. "Yes, quite."

"You and Rohan are betrothed?" Nafi's eyes sparkled. "I do love a good wedding!"

"Yes, well, we have more important things before us than a wedding for now," Finn said, even as his cheeks were stained pink with excitement at the thought of being *married* to Rohan.

Serxio will love planning that!

"Yes, but it is strange, because the note from Hugues that brought me here indicated that your–ah, father was the problem. You are King Thalanil's son, yes? Though you look quite human… sort of," Nafi offered softly.

"No, it's my uncle that is the problem and my exterior hides what's inside of me," Finn said.

"I'm sure that must be the case. You look like a perfectly normal beautiful young man," Nafi said.

"I assure you that if he were your enemy you would be in more danger right here and now than with anyone else," Tearlach said.

The guards who had been keeping a relative distance, were suddenly all up and around their king.

Narrowing his eyes at Tearlach, "But we *are* allies, King Nafi, so there's no need to be alarmed. King Tearlach is merely having his fun. He has a strange sense of humor."

He shrugged Tearlach's arm off of him and tried to smile genuinely at King Nafi. His guards were not smiling back. Nafi's right hand was tugging at the collar of the cloak.

Quickly, Finn got out, "But I'm sure that you need rest after your long journey."

"I'm sure I could put my feet up for a time. Travel is exhausting. And I am parched. Plus, I could eat," Nafi said, which had Tearlach scowling again.

Doubting that the King of Bolan had done anything other than sit the entire way in his jewel-encrusted carriage, Finn graciously said, "Won't you please come inside to rest, sup and drink?"

Finn gestured for Nafi to precede him into Reave Castle. The King of Bolan did, but not before his servants scurried behind him to arrange his pure white cloak and make sure that it was not dirtied by the floor in any way. The guards followed afterwards. Not a few of them gave Finn a very suspicious look. Finn sighed. With one last look at Tearlach, who was patting his dogs' heads, Finn made to go inside.

"Aren't you coming?" Finn asked the Achuvien king.

"Oh, no, this is not my castle. I do not have to play host," Tearlach said with a shrug. "While it was pleasing to see you set Hugues on fire back there, I am curious what he will say to my Rohan."

"He's *not* your Rohan. We do not share him," Finn replied dryly.

But his heart beat faster at the thought of what Hugues was saying to Rohan right now.

I must trust that Rohan loves me and knows me. He's seen the worst and not turned away. There's nothing that Hugues can say that would be worse than that.

Another shrug. "We're family, Finrael. That is how things are for Achuviens."

"Hugues isn't stupid," Finn murmured. "I imagine he's thought of me as a nuisance in some ways, but only considered the dark rumors about me as something he could use to separate me from Rohan. Now, he realizes that these things might be problematic for him."

Tearlach lifted an eyebrow. "My goodness, cousin, is it almost like you *do* have a strategizing bone in your body! I will see what Hugues plans and report back to you."

"Thank you, Tearlach," Finn said gently.

He doesn't realize that you played him by being good, honest and open, does he? Now, the cruel and calculating Tearlach is like one of his dogs. Playful with you, but willing to bite anyone else upon your command. While you play Hugues quite differently, the God of Death whispered in his mind.

The raven was sitting on his shoulder. Finn hardly felt its weight or when it rubbed its beak against his cheek. It had never been so affectionate before. Finn wondered if that meant anything. He reached up and ruffled its feathers tentatively. It fluttered its wings, but seemed pleased.

I do feel affection for Tearlach. I do want us to be friends and allies. I meant what I said about taking care of the Achuviens regardless of any help he might give us, Finn said. *That this encouraged him to offer it all the more is good, but it wasn't what I was going for.*

Are you sure? You've triggered his surprisingly protective nature that has long been dormant.

He does have a good nature regardless of whatever else he must be, Finn said firmly. *I will be his friend and encourage his trust. He will not regret it.*

That golden heart of yours may be the only thing that spares this world from complete destruction, the God of Death murmured. *Or condemns it.*

No, I won't do that! Finn swallowed as he watched Tearlach walk off, waving over his shoulder with his dogs at his heels. *I will not do that. Rohan would never forgive me for that.*

Will not?

You cannot make me, Finn restated.

What makes you think I want that future? The god asked.

I don't know. I hope you don't. But wasn't creating me part of your revenge against the Fae for allowing Marikoth to live? Finn asked.

Without life there is nothing to devour, the God of Death answered softly as Finn caressed his feathers.

If we were to end Marikoth and restore the Empire, people would worship you again, Finn pointed out.

The God of Death let out something that sounded like a combination of caw and laughter. *You think to manipulate me, too, my chosen?*

Not in the least. I am merely pointing out possibilities that may interest you, Finn said evenly.

And Tearlach thinks you are so innocent!

I am what he thinks… and I am not. I'm trying to keep him and the others safe. My Rohan… safe, Finn said. *So if there are other parts of me I must bring to bear at times, I will do that too.*

But that does not mean I am not–not the Finn people know.

I see! But will they?

The God of Death sprang from his shoulder and flew up into the air. It was circling the castle before it disappeared. With a sigh, Finn went inside to take care of his and Rohan's newest guest.

EXTINGUISH

Rohan was drinking the cold water that Thalanil had gotten for him when his Uncle Hugues came striding towards him. His uncle was dressed in formal robes and he had to pick them up so that they did not drag in the mud or dust. For a moment, Rohan could not imagine why Hugues was playing dress-up, but then he realized the King of Bolan had arrived. He should have been in formal clothes himself.

But training comes first as Thalanil would say or did say, I'm pretty sure.

"Rohan!" Hugues' face was alternating between flushed and pale, but stayed flushed when he caught sight of Thalanil crouched beside him. "Is something wrong?"

The sheer suspicion in his uncle's voice that Thalanil had hurt him was painful to hear. His relationship with Thalanil had turned a corner so Hugues' suspicions were not unwarranted. But, unlike in the past, he realized that Hugues' concern sprung from his belief in Thalanil's treacherous nature rather than love for him.

"No, I just overdid it," Rohan admitted as he swallowed down more of the cool water. "Thalanil was helping me. He's training me in magic."

"Here, let me get you some more water. I would recommend some food and a rest after this," Thalanil said as he gracefully got up and headed over to the well.

Rohan thought that a lovemaking session with Finn would set him up right as rain, but he certainly didn't expect Thalanil to offer that and he wouldn't mention it. The thought of a bath and an afternoon lovemaking session would not only refresh him, but the leaders would all see the effect of it. That would help answer some of the questions that they would have later that evening.

"You look pale, Rohan," Hugues remarked.

"Did you not see the new stable?" Rohan asked rather weakly. "That was my doing. So a little bit of paleness is warranted. I rather think it should be so nice in there that I might want to change rooms with the horses."

"How–ohhhhh… you are able to use the magic of the Aeturnals to build!" Hugues realized, awe spreading across his face. "That's incredible! It has not been seen since… since forever ago."

"Yes, well, it wasn't exactly what I intended to do, but, evidently, when I reach for the Aeturnal in me, I am a builder," Rohan said. "Not that it will do much against Marikoth. Thalanil has already restored the one wall that will keep him at bay."

"I do not believe it is your role to do anything about Marikoth," Tearlach said as he and his two dogs came over. "That's all the sweet Finrael's duty. His gifts are made for war. Yours are made for what comes after."

Hugues jerked around towards the Achuvien king. His lips flattened before he quickly smoothed

his face into expressionlessness. “Is there something you need, King Tearlach?”

“No, but I am certain I know what *you* need, Hugues.” Tearlach smiled at him. It was not a nice smile.

Hugues did not ask what Tearlach thought he needed. He stared at the Achuvien king with a hard look in his eyes. Tearlach appeared unmoved. Thalanil returned with the water. Rohan eagerly took it and swallowed half of the liquid in one go.

“Why are you here, Uncle?” Rohan asked after the silence had stretched too long.

Hugues’ head swung around towards him. “King Nafi has arrived.”

“Yes, I saw the line of carriages. Orange against our brown landscape is hard to miss,” Rohan smiled. “I will attend to him in a moment, though I’m sure that the staff are seeing to his needs.”

“Finrael took care of it,” Tearlach said almost sweetly. “Greeted him and is getting him settled. Sent Hugues here to let you know.”

Like a messenger boy. Ah, now I understand some of my uncle’s flushing and paling. Finn sent him away with a flea in his ear.

“Ah, excellent, so all is well then, Uncle. What is your concern?” Rohan guessed from his uncle’s pinched expression that there was a problem.

Or maybe it was the company. Had Thalanil and Hugues been near one another before? Not for this long.

“We need to speak, Rohan. You’ve been avoiding it for too long. We really *must* speak privately,” Hugues insisted.

Rohan let out a sigh. That was likely true, but he had no desire to do so now. And what would Hugues say that he did not already know? But it would be good to have his uncle on his side again if that could be possible. He was excellent in the political arena. He knew Artremaya and Nafi well. They would need help to convince the other leaders to… cede control of their territories. If Hugues was not by his side or said nothing… Well, it would only add to the problems they had.

“Whatever you need to say to me, you can say in front of them,” Rohan said, indicating Tearlach and Thalanil.

Hugues stilled before he straightened. “While I *might* understand speaking in front of Thalanil… what about…” His eyes slid to Tearlach.

“I’m family, too!” Tearlach chuckled. “Don’t you recall? Finrael and I are cousins! I suppose that makes us family, as well, Thalanil. How fancy!”

Thalanil lifted an eyebrow, but said nothing one way or the other. He understood the connection between Tearlach, the Necromancer and the God of Death. The discussion between Finn and Tearlach must have gone very well. He could see an almost warmth from the Achuvien king that had not been there before.

Finn has a way with people.

“Yes, Uncle, Tearlach is family,” Rohan said. “And is key to our plans against Marikoth.”

“I’m *key*! Though really, like I said, I think this is truly the little one’s fight,” Tearlach said. “But afterwards, I might be of some use.”

Rohan wondered what that meant. Finn would know.

Hugues tightened his hands into fists, but then released them. “What are those plans? I have been out of the loop. I would like to assist you in any way I can.”

It was interesting that it was only now that Rohan was reluctant to speak openly. Tearlach and Thalanil were kings of rival nations. Hugues was supposed to be his devoted uncle and advisor.

“It depends,” Rohan said.

"On what?" Hugues asked.

"On whether he trusts you or not, Hugues," Thalanil said softly. "You *did* serve Marikoth before, did you not?"

Hugues' eyes flickered to the Fae king before settling back on Rohan. "Your parents determined to do that, Rohan. I followed their lead as a loyal subject should."

"You *advised* them," Rohan's voice was sharp. He let out a breath. "Just like you used to advise me. I do not believe they would have made any decision without your input. So are you saying that you advised them *against* joining up with Marikoth?"

Hugues wavered a little as Rohan pinned him with a stare. "No, I did not. It seemed the best course considering Rirea's situation. Until Marikoth betrayed them, I believed it was the right course."

"I wonder if your desire to get back at me didn't sway your decision-making," Thalanil remarked softly.

Hugues' eyes flashed. "We have Aeturnal blood! Your land, this land, Bolan, and Sultane are all ours by rights!"

"But my brother did not promise to give you the whole Empire, did he?" Thalanil's expression was stony.

"No, no, he did not. He was willing to cede to us more fertile land! We needed it! You can't deny that!" Hugues snapped.

"Was it part of the current Empire or the lands of Sultane or Bolan?" Rohan asked dryly.

Hugues said nothing, which was an answer all in itself.

"We gave you as much food as you needed!" Thalanil hissed. "But still you betrayed me! And here you are, pretending that my brother was truly offering you anything but vapor!"

The dogs circled Tearlach's great feet, snuffling and growling when the other got too close. They reminded Rohan of his uncle and Thalanil. Though really he should expect more snapping considering the history between the two men.

"It is quite easy to promise lands to another that are not one's own," Tearlach pointed out. "I could offer you Sultane and Bolan now, too. In fact, I do so! Voila! What will you do for me?"

"You make it sound foolish and ill-thought out, but it–"

"Was," Rohan interrupted his uncle. "Tearlach is right. And that my parents would betray a friend and ally over it shows… a lack of character."

"You would say that of your parents? Rohan–"

"I say it as someone who loves them unconditionally. But it was wrong. More than wrong," Rohan said and shook his head. "Even if Marikoth would have gone to war with Rirea against Sultane or Bolan… the bloodshed…"

"You are a very moral man, Rohan. You always have been. And I've been proud of that. But you see how bad things are now. If we had some of that land now things would be very different," Hugues started.

"We would be desperately trying to hold onto it and we'd still need to go up against Marikoth. We'd be split even more than we are now," Rohan said. "You think I'm not ruthless enough to rule. You've always thought that. You believed you could handle that part."

"Perhaps," Hugues said.

"You're wrong. Ruthlessness is not the only way to rule," Rohan said.

"No, you are the king of life and delight," Tearlach said, but not in a mocking way, instead in an almost poetic way. "Finrael will be your sword and shield… and *threat*."

"Yes, yes, I could see that. But do you know if you can trust such a sword?" Hugues said.

"Trust the little one? With my life, I think, and more," Tearlach answered.

"You don't give trust lightly, Tearlach," Thalanil murmured.

"No, but your boy has won me over. I think I am in love again. First, Rohan has my heart and now Finrael shares it! I am a romantic! What can I say?" Tearlach made a mock bow.

"And how does this *sword* play into your plan?" Hugues asked.

"He can drain Marikoth to nothing," Rohan said.

This was not news to anyone, including Marikoth, which meant telling Hugues risked nothing.

"Of course, he can," Hugues muttered. "So why does he not just do it?"

"My brother drains anything and anyone around him. As fast as Finrael could drain him, he can replenish himself," Thalanil explained.

Rohan thought of the destruction Finn had caused when he'd been unable to hold all the power he'd drawn into himself. Even if Rohan was there with him, it would be difficult.

And I'm a weakness for him. Marikoth could drain me. No, Finn must get him alone and isolated among people he cannot drain: the Dreadbrood.

"So no army can go up against him? An enemy army would simply fuel him?" Hugues looked horrified. "So why do you need to speak to Artremaya or Nafi? Their armies are less than useless against Marikoth."

"It is not for their armies that I want to speak to them. You may have brought them here for a war council, but I need them for something else entirely," Rohan answered. "It's for–how did you put it, Tearlach?--what comes after."

"After Marikoth is defeated? It sounds impossible, but it must not be," Hugues guessed.

Rohan would not be talking to him of the plan for using the Dreadbrood even though Marikoth likely knew all about that too.

"So what do you need from them after this miraculous win?" Hugues asked.

"I need them to… give their lands to me and submit to my leadership," Rohan said and laughed.

Yes, he laughed.

Saying it so baldly make it clear just how insane it was that he was even considering that this request would be acceded to.

"Why?" Hugues asked.

"Because it is the only way to restore the balance of the land," Thalanil was the one to answer, which had Rohan turning towards him in surprise. "The old Aeturnal Empire must be restored and ruled, once more, by the Heir and Death's Chosen. Only then can what ails the Empire fully be cured."

Hugues was blinking rapidly. "And you–you agree with this, Thalanil? It would mean your lands, too, would be under Rohan and Finrael's rule."

"I do agree with it. It is the only way to make things right," Thalanil answered, looking away.

It clearly hurt him still to say, but he had come around. So maybe thinking that the others would come around, too, was not so mad.

No, it was insane.

"The lack of life in Rirea will soon spread–is spreading–to the other lands. The overgrowth in the current Empire is strangling everything there," Rohan explained. "There is a series of power stones that connects the Empire to me. Finn can drain the excess life and feed it to me. Once all the lands are under my control, I will be able to access the full network and spread that life evenly. Every land will bloom. None will wither or be strangled by life."

"And you have to convince Artremaya and Nafi to–to give up their lands, their titles, everything?" Hugues stroked his chin.

"Though you make it sound as impossible as it is, you look as if you have an idea," Rohan said.

"They aren't their parents, which is a good thing. You wouldn't have gotten past the first sentence with them," Hugues admitted. "Artremaya and Nafi will listen. They'll likely laugh before reaching for their weapons–"

"Things are more dire in their lands than they are letting on," Rohan said. "Artremaya admitted some of it. Nafi's ridiculous show of wealth confirms something is wrong there as well."

"He was draped in jewels," Tearlach snorted. "He probably wipes his ass with them and then tosses the shit-covered things away."

"Then things really are terrible," Rohan said.

"Yes, I see your point. He was a bit ostentatious," Hugues admitted.

"So things are bad in both places," Rohan said. "But bad enough? They are not at Rirea levels, but this shows them what's coming not too long from now."

"But they will hardly look to a Rirean king to rule them seeing all of this. They will think that it is because of mismanagement on our part that the lack of life is so much more advanced," Hugues pointed out. "It is not, of course, but we will have no explanation–"

"We have one," Rohan interrupted and realized that he had to speak of the Dreadbrood. "A very compelling one. But one that will help us win against Marikoth."

"What?" Hugues asked.

"The Dreadbrood. Death's Army of the Undead," Rohan said. "It lies under our land. Waiting."

Hugues went very still.

"And Finrael will control it," Tearlach added. "So if the good king and queen are not winnable by words, they will be by the threat of Rohan's sword. The little one. Death's Chosen."

Hugues jerked.

"The threat won't have to even be made. They will understand it whether Finn and I say it out loud or not," Rohan said, "You wanted me to be ruthless, Uncle, yet you seem shocked by all of this."

"Just that you, too, know the threat but you don't recognize it," Hugues said.

"Finrael is not a danger to Rohan or anyone here unless he chooses to be," Thalanil said coldly. "He controls his magic. It does not control him."

"Do you know *what* your son is, Thalanil?" Hugues asked the Fae king tightly.

"*What* my son is?" Thalanil repeated, his voice soft and dangerous.

"He named himself Death's Chosen. Right there." Hugues pointed back towards the front of the castle.

"Technically, I named him twice, but Finrael accepted it as it is true the first time," Tearlach said as he picked up a stick and tossed it for the two massive dogs. With twin howls they dashed off to get the stick. They snapped at each other as they ran. "And why would he *not* be proud of that title, dear Hugues? The chosen of a god sounds quite important and useful too."

Hugues glared at him, but softened his tone when he spoke to Rohan, "Finrael took the book that explains *exactly* why being that particular god's chosen is a dangerous thing. Rohan, Death's Chosen is the one–"

"To lead the Dreadbrood against all life," Rohan finished for him.

"You know this, but you don't seem to understand–"

"Finn told me all about it," Rohan said with a shrug. "And he felt bad for getting angry with you when you confronted him as you did the other day, though he should not have. Because, like always,

you were looking for reasons to sow distrust between us."

"I am trying to protect you!" Hugues violently shook his head. "The God of Death cursed the Ravenspars and threw the Aeturnals out of their own empire. You are the Heir and have the magic that they once wielded and this–this *creature* is sent to stop your ascension!"

"Creature?" Rohan's voice was so low.

"I know how he looks and how he seems. Sweet. Innocent. Loving," Hugues began, "But Finrael is *not* that. He was crafted–"

"He was *born*!" Thalanil spat. "He is Maeve and my child, you odious cretin!"

The Fae king lunged at Hugues, who stumbled backwards just as Rohan caught Thalanil around the shoulders and held him back. Magic crackled around Thalanil. Hugues had out a dagger. They wanted to kill each other. It would not be much of a battle considering Thalanil could likely take that dagger and make Hugues eat it.

"No! No, I think not!" Tearlach knocked the dagger out of Hugues' hand. "Rohan, control Thalanil. We have enough enemies outside of this castle!"

"Thalanil, I know he deserves it, but–Tearlach is right. I need you to be calm," Rohan said, even as he wanted to belt his uncle, too, for those words.

"Whatever Finrael might want–whatever is in his heart–he cannot deny what the God of Death has planned for him," Hugues gritted out, rubbing his hand where Tearlach's massive paw had struck the dagger out.

"You have no idea what the God of Death actually wants," Rohan said with a faint, bitter laugh.

He thought of the raven passing by. No, his uncle did not understand it at all.

"It's nothing good," Hugues muttered.

"You're wrong," Rohan said. "Because in the end, there can only be death if there is life. Without life there is nothing for death."

He knew exactly what happened when there was no life. So did the God of Death. That was not what anyone wanted.

"His objections to Finrael have nothing to do with being Death's Chosen. He cannot even admit it now. Maeve loved *me*, Hugues, and she died for our son!" Thalanil hissed.

"It was never a fair fight, Thalanil," Hugues spat back. "A god was on your side. Not even true love can stand against that. You'd best remember that, Rohan. Whatever love is in Finrael's heart, if the God of Death chooses to douse it then it will be extinguished."

SURRENDER

Rohan breezed into his chambers, determined to bathe and dress quickly, in order to join Finn in greeting King Nafi and Queen Artremaya formally. A small, intimate meal was scheduled for that night.

Normally, there would have been a great feast with jugglers, poets, singers, dancers and more. But considering the state of Rirea, what had just happened the day before and what they were facing, Rohan believed a more sober affair appropriate and truly all that could be managed anyway.

And there was this continuing, widening rift with his uncle. Though he had earned new friends and advisors in Thalanil and–gods help him–Tearlach, he still ached for the man that had raised him like his own son. He kept thinking–or more like *hoping*–that Hugues would turn back into the man he'd thought he'd known. But this was a childish wish. With every word that Hugues spoke, every action he took, every ill belief he revealed, Rohan felt less and less connected to him.

And yet I must put on a facade tonight of complete equanimity. I have to be at my best with two monarchs who will have no desire to trust me the moment I explain what the solution to all our problems is. No wonder I want Hugues. He was always good at the pretty lies.

After leaving his uncle and the others in the training circle, Rohan had headed into the castle's kitchens. Serxio was working with the staff to see that the Gold Room–an octagonal space with a round table and red and gold decor–was set up with the nicest china.

Serxio was also involved with the menu selection along with Cook Shelton. Even little Hannah had gotten in on the action, picking the linen to be used. She especially loved the creamy white tablecloths and gold napkins that had been his mother's favorites. Her eyes had gone very wide and a smile had appeared on her pale face as he'd told her that she shared his mother's taste.

"The taste of a queen?" Hannah had asked rather breathlessly.

"Yes, dear Hannah, exactly that," Rohan had assured her.

Her cheeks pinked and he felt something in him loosen at her undisguised joy. When the Wall had come down, Cook Shelton had confessed to him that Hannah had grabbed her hand and led her into the basement, convinced that they were about to be killed. But the little girl had been just as determined to save Cook Shelton if she could.

"The Glowing Man is coming! The Glowing Man is coming!" she'd cried. "He'll make everyone dead! I'll–I'll protect you, Cook Shelton!"

So a genuine smile from the little girl was priceless to Rohan. Hannah might be young, but she had already lived through so much. When Rohan looked at her, he saw Rirea as a whole. Battered, bruised, bloodied, but still able to smile, if rarely. He would fix this world for Hannah and everyone else. This dark shadow would pass away.

"I think she shall be in charge of all linen from now on," Cook Shelton said.

"Really? Really and truly?" More big eyes and smiles.

"If Cook Shelton says it, she means it," Rohan answered. "You've certainly got my vote."

"Indeed, I do mean it." Cook Shelton grinned, but then her head snapped towards where Serxio was dipping a spoon into a bubbling saucepan where something rich and hearty was cooking. "Lord Lemos, if you're hungry there is bread, butter, cheese and apples over there."

Her work-worn right hand shot out to point to said items. Serxio's head lifted and a guilty expression crossed his handsome face, but he quickly hid it.

"I'll have you know, Cook Shelton, that I am *tasting* this to make sure that it is acceptable for tonight's dinner!" Serxio explained.

Cook Shelton put her hands on her ample hips and gave the foppish young lord a sweetly poisonous look as she retorted, "Yes, I know. So you've said. But you've tasted that over *four* times already. You moaned in pleasure after the first time, said something about the gods after the second, hinted you'd like to marry me after the third, and the fourth left you speechless. So what pray tell will the *fifth* taste tell you exactly?"

Rohan met Hannah's eyes as they both sought not to giggle at this dressing down.

"Well, let me explain it fully." Serxio lifted his spoon up as if it were a rapier. "I have to make sure that it goes with everything else. It very well may be delicious on its own, but mixed with the rest? I must confirm!"

"You have to confirm, do you?" Cook Shelton snorted. "So that means you have to try every single dish I'm making for this evening with the sauce?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Serxio gave out a rather dramatic sigh. "It's a hard job, but someone has to do it." He placed a hand against his chest. "That is why I volunteered myself for this difficult mission."

"Serxio," Rohan said dryly.

"Yes, my king?" Serxio held up the spoon as if it too were at attention.

"Make sure your *tasting* leaves enough left over for our guests, won't you?" Rohan responded.

Serxio and the spoon bowed.

"Don't worry, your majesty, I've got a pan of his favorite roast potatoes on. That will keep him happy and save the meal!" Cook Shelton smiled.

Rohan's own stomach growled. "The potatoes with the rosemary and sea salt with the melted butter and–"

"I'll send a plate up to you as well," Cook Shelton laughed.

"Make sure not to get any grease on the outfit I picked out for you, my king!" Serxio called after him.

Rohan saluted. "I shall take care with it… unless it's something I truly don't wish to wear."

"My king! I've chosen it so carefully! Give it a chance!" Serxio wailed. "Milius put it together to my specifications."

Rohan knew then that it was likely to be something very bright and that he'd rather toss in the fire than wear, but he smiled gamely at Serxio. "I'll look at it."

"You'll love it, your majesty!" Serxio beamed.

He highly doubted that, but disappointing Serxio was always hard.

After leaving the kitchen, Rohan had bumped into Leonid. His Captain of the Guard was coordinating with the other rulers' security to determine who would be where and when. The Wall being back in place made them all much safer, but Rohan was not counting on anything anymore. Until

Marikoth was dealt with, he would not let his guard down again.

"My king!" Leonid greeted.

"Leonid. How are the security talks going?" Rohan asked.

Leonid grimaced. "Everyone thinks their ideas are the best."

"Make sure you're open to hearing them," Rohan suggested mildly.

Leonid was always open-minded, but he was also territorial as Rohan guessed the guards and security were for the other monarchs.

"Absolutely, my king." Leonid nodded. "But I'm not quite sure they believe that the walking trees in the courtyard are not dangerous. And the magically appearing stables have them all on edge."

Rohan grinned. He couldn't help it. "Well, we needed those fixed, enlarged and improved. Evidently, I must have been thinking that when I was training with Thalanil."

"Next time can you be thinking of better officer's quarters? There's been this leak right near my bed that I would love fixed," Leonid suggested.

Rohan felt another burst of happiness. Reaching and accepting his Aeturnal side had immediately brought such good results. Great results actually.

"There's so much I want to do, Leonid," Rohan enthused. "Not just fixing the castle, but the rest of Rirea…"

"Not just Rirea, your majesty, the whole of the Empire," Leonid reminded him.

"That was what I was going to say, but it's an alien thought." Rohan grimaced. "Finn and I have to craft an argument that will convince the other two sovereigns to bow to us. Starting tonight."

"It's a heavy task, to be sure, your majesty," Leonid agreed. "But they came here not out of some idle curiosity. Lord De Clare's letters might have spoken of dire tidings to come, but unless the others were experiencing something rather dire themselves, I don't think they would have hurried here like this."

Rohan nodded. "You mirror my thoughts exactly. They came a very long way with quite a bit of alacrity. They have their own reasons for wanting to join together."

Leonid cleared his throat as he offered, "He is hardly my favorite person, but Lord De Clare does know King Nafi well. Maybe he will have some insights."

Rohan sighed. "I was just with my uncle. He was being hysterical as always about Finn."

Leonid's expression immediately darkened. "What about Finn?"

"That he's here to destroy us all," Rohan let out a bitter laugh. "The same rot as always."

"Finn would *never* do that!" Leonid shook his head. "Not unless he was out of his head."

"And that is not going to happen."

Not anymore.

"But, and forgive me for saying this, what does Lord De Clare want you to do exactly even if everything he said about Finn was true?" Leonid asked. "If Finn wanted to, he *could* destroy us all. Right now. And there would be little to nothing we could do about it."

Rohan nodded slowly. "You're quite right."

"So what's your uncle's game plan then? Ask Finn to leave nicely? If he really is our enemy it's not likely he'd go. Not without taking us all down with him!" Leonid shook his head almost violently. "And I definitely need to beg your pardon on this last part, but I don't think his dislike and distrust of Finn comes from him having Death Magic or whatever. It's because he's Thalanil and Maeve's son."

Another nod from Rohan. "Everything you've just said Thalanil and I had already come to. Great minds. And you need no forgiveness for your blunt words and clear counsel." He patted Leonid's shoulder. "I appreciate that more than I can say."

After leaving Leonid and going upstairs to his floor, he'd found his uncle waiting outside his bedchamber door as if speaking of him below had made him appear here. Hugues looked both hopeful and hurt; as if he wanted things to be good between them, but expected to be spoken to sharply. Rohan felt a dagger of guilt, but every sharp word had been earned.

"Uncle, you are stretching my patience today. What more can possibly be said between us?" Rohan asked.

His uncle was carrying a large scroll. Rohan's shoulders went tight as he thought it was from the crypt. Yet more information on Finn's powers as Death's Chosen? There would be nothing useful, he was sure. Just more dire warnings and vague predictions.

"This is the original treaty between the Empire, Rirea, Bolan and Sultane," his uncle answered. "When the Empire was split."

Rohan blinked. "It doesn't look old enough to be the original."

"It is magically protected," Hugues explained. "Each kingdom has a copy that the Fae made from the original they hold in their kingdom. After our discussion earlier, I realized that there might be something in the treaty that could help us. Or rather, help *you* with the discussions tonight. Or if there's something ill in here, you can be prepared. Nafi is quite familiar with this document so we need to be. I mean… *you* need to be."

Hugues held it out to him. Rohan was about to take it, but then he said, "Come inside. Let's look at it together."

Hugues' surprise was painfully evident on his face. Rohan's own emotions were guarded even from himself. Rohan gestured for his uncle to precede him into the room. The Guards opened the door and stood at attention as they passed. Rohan closed it with his boot.

His eyes went to the Luminus. But it was, thankfully, dark. No Marikoth laughing as he spoke of his deadly plans. Rohan knew it needed to be moved to a more secure location, but it felt like a failure somehow to do that. As if he were giving in to his fear of Marikoth. But then again, having the Luminus here meant that Marikoth could at any time appear in his most sacred of spaces.

His uncle, seemingly unaware of what the Luminus was, unrolled part of the scroll on the table beside it and sat down on the sofa. Rohan sat down beside him as his uncle started to read the scroll's text. One of his fingers followed the lines of text as he mouthed the words. The text was cursive and beautiful. Rohan was surprised it was written in Common, but, then again, it was the language that humans and Fae shared.

Less confusion that way? Everyone says making a deal with the Fae is always dangerous as they will get the better hand every time. But what about this time?

The scroll began with the flowery language describing all merits of the parties to the treaty, which Rohan just skimmed over. He found royalty's usual desire to be lauded tiresome at best and a whole lot of other far worse things.

"Ah, here's something!" Hugues directed his attention to a line mid-way down the scroll. He read, "If these kingdoms come under mutual threat, the parties hereby decree that they will bind together and act as one."

"That *is* helpful." Rohan smiled. "Marikoth is certainly a threat to every one of the kingdoms."

"Yes, but it also says that 'from this time forth, the kingdoms shall remain separate and no longer under a single banner except in times of mutual threat.'"

"Not so good. We might get them to agree to help oust Marikoth, but we need to reinstate the Empire itself," Rohan said and balled one fist over his thigh. "We really don't even need them to handle Marikoth. Like Tearlach said, it truly will be Finn and the Dreadbrood that handle that."

Hugues stared ahead for a moment. He was clearly in deep thought, but then said, "Marikoth is the obvious threat, but isn't the true threat the imbalance of life?"

Rohan's brows drew together as he thought on this. "It is! You're right, Uncle! It's the overwhelming threat. Marikoth is but one Fae, but what's happening to the kingdoms is far greater than that. If we don't fix what's wrong then every kingdom will be destroyed."

"Exactly!" His uncle beamed. "You explained earlier about a network? And power stones?"

"In essence, Finn will drain the overgrowth in the Empire and send that power into me. I will then feed that extra power into the power stones. Life will flow throughout the old Empire more evenly then," Rohan explained. "The restoration will be more complicated, but that's what is at the heart of it."

They had to do something about the Dreadbrood as well, but that was another issue. He just knew it couldn't be housed within the Empire or all of their attempts to balance the land would be for naught. But who would take on the dread army and the danger that came with it?

"I take it that the overgrowth will have to be drained and moved more than once?" his uncle asked.

"I would imagine it would be an ongoing work," Rohan answered truthfully. "I feel… I *know* that Finn and I are similar to gardeners and the Empire is a huge garden that we must tend. The work will never truly end. Not if we don't wish the garden to go to wrack and ruin."

"Then there we have it! This is an ongoing threat to the kingdoms. They must be joined together in order to save them all," Hugues said. "But, of course, this is a piece of paper. A very old piece of paper. And the current parties are far removed from those who signed it."

"Artremaya seems the sort to honor such promises," Rohan said quietly. "Though it would be a bitter pill to swallow."

"Nafi is not," Hugues responded dryly. "It is not that he is dishonorable, but he has always ruled for his people, but also for himself and his family," Hugues explained. "He has no children of his own, but he has a favored nephew that he has been grooming to take over from him for some time. It is interesting to me that he has not brought Arage."

"Do you suspect that there is unrest in Bolan? Did he leave behind his nephew to monitor things?" Rohan guessed.

Hugues stroked his chin. "Perhaps. It is curious to be sure."

"Well, this is a start." Rohan began to stand up. "I need to–"

He got no further, because the Luminus started to glow. The wash of its magical light flowed over him and Hugues.

"Is that–that a Luminus?" Hugues breathed as he too rose.

The image was different than it had been before. No longer the stone walls of the tower were shown, but instead it showed a throne. Firelight bloodily flickered over its surface. Suddenly, Marikoth was in frame. He sprawled out on the throne. His eyes were heavy lidded. His mouth was wreathed with a lax smile. He looked drunk or on drugs. He ran a hand through his hair.

"Oh, you're there! I was going to rewatch that delicious scene between you and my nephew. Luminus sex. Who knew?" Marikoth chuckled.

Rohan stepped so that he was between the Luminus and the table. Hopefully, Marikoth was too out of it to notice the scroll. He heard the rustle of paper as his uncle rolled up the scroll and hid it in his robes.

"What have you done, Marikoth?" Rohan asked.

He was surprised that he sounded *tired* rather than angry.

"What do you mean?" Marikoth gave him an almost impish look of delight.

"How many people have you *drained* to look like you do?" Rohan rephrased.

Marikoth's shoulders shook with silent laughter even as he rolled his eyes at "how foolish" Rohan was being. "How silly" it was to worry about people who couldn't give a damn about him or his.

"They were content to hide behind their Wall while you suffered. What do you care what I do to them now?" Marikoth asked.

"You're unwell," Rohan stated simply.

Despite his relaxed, drunk demeanor, Marikoth seemed bleaker and thinner than ever. Bones walking.

"Do you think I'm unwell, Tela?" Marikoth asked someone out of view.

There was a faint, girlish response, which Rohan could not hear. Whatever had been said did not appease Marikoth evidently for the Death Mage reached and pulled the apprentice Priestess into his lap. Rohan remembered Tela well and his expression darkened slightly, but he didn't want to see even her in Marikoth's clutches. In a prison cell after a trial, yes. But this? No.

"Am I unwell, Tela? Tell Rohan what you think since you're right *here* with me," Marikoth demanded.

"N-n-no," she got out through chattering teeth as Marikoth caressed her cheeks with one long, bony finger. "Y-y-you're quite well."

"Right you are, Tela! I'm *overflowing* with life!" Marikoth tossed his head back and laughed.

Tela cringed in his lap, trying to ease herself away, but Marikoth's hands clutched at her, keeping her in place. She let out a high-pitched shriek that Marikoth cut off by covering her mouth with one of his hands. She began to weep. Rohan fisted his hands at his sides.

"Stop this, Marikoth," Rohan demanded.

"I won't until you surrender to me. You know that, Rohan," Marikoth breathily answered as he licked Tela's tears. "I felt you today. The whole Empire shook with your actions. More so than with the restoration of the Wall." Those red, mad eyes fixed upon him. "What were you doing, Rohan?"

Rohan said nothing.

Marikoth squeezed Tela's chin until her muffled cries could be heard even through his hand. "It was interesting, Rohan. Very interesting. Things were hopeful." He laughed, but not madly or happily, almost uncomfortably. "People actually raced outside to see what was happening. So what am I to tell them, Rohan?"

It's because I accepted my Aeturnal side, Rohan realized silently. *Bolan and Sultane likely experienced something too.*

"I'll make dear Tela here squeak until you tell me–"

But Marikoth got no further as the door to Rohan's chambers burst open though it appeared to be in half time due to the time shift within the Luminus' effect radius. A figure clad head to toe in black was revealed there wielding a staff. That figure entered the orbit of the Luminus' power and it was Finn. But Finn looked *different*.

He knew Finn had not been wearing this all black outfit earlier. Nor the silver crown upon his head. Nor was he usually there with magic swirling around him like a storm. And his green eyes… They were black.

"Marikoth," Finn's voice was soft, but it silenced everyone, even Tela.

She stopped squirming helplessly in Marikoth's rude embrace. Marikoth was like a statue in his stillness. Rohan and Hugues both stared at him too. Only Finn moved with a feline grace. Magic flared in every step.

“Marikoth,” Finn repeated. “You dare to show your face to Rohan again?”

An expression of hatred and fear rippled across Marikoth’s face as he stared at Finn yet when he spoke he did not address Finn at all, though his gaze was fixed there. “Hugues, I see you hiding back there. Perhaps you can talk sense to Rohan. I am the *only* hope to restore the Empire. Your family will once again rule. But Rohan would throw himself into Death’s pit by loving *that*.”

Finn’s eyes narrowed. A raven suddenly swooped down from the ceiling and perched on his shoulder. Finn extended a hand towards Marikoth, who flinched. The bird seemed to unnerve him more than anything.

The God of Death.

Its blue-white eyes met his and it cawed at him softly then it cuddled against Finn’s cheek.

“You have stolen magic that is not yours, Marikoth Ravenspar,” Finn intoned, his arm not lowering. “And for that, your life is forfeit.”

“Bring down the Wall!” Marikoth shouted, his red eyes blazing. “Try and come get me! Watch as I drain the life from all of these fools!”

Marikoth lifted Tela up by the neck. He shook her like she weighed little more than a kitten. Her eyes rolled back into her head. Her pale skin turned gray. She turned to ash and blew away.

“Good gods,” Hugues prayed and was looking away from the Luminus.

Rohan shut his eyes for a moment. He forced himself to open them and watch this scene play out. Tela’s death would not be forgotten. She might not have been innocent, but no one deserved to go like that.

No one except Marikoth?

Finn cocked his head to the side. A slight smile lifted his lips as he darkly promised, “I will come, Marikoth, and you will pay for every wrong you have ever committed. Prepare yourself for the end.”

INEVITABLE

Marikoth was the one to cut the connection to the Luminus first. Finn felt a hard, cold smile flitter across his lips at this show of weakness. The raven made soft, happy sounds as it pressed its head against his cheek and he ruffled its feathers. Marikoth knew that the consequences for using Death Magic were coming home to roost.

As the light of the Luminus faded, Finn turned towards Rohan and Hugues. He was still encased in the icy embrace of his magic and the god he served. There was a distance between him and them, much like the distance between the living and the dead. But seeing Rohan cracked that frozen shell and made him want to reach out. Both men looked at him with trepidation, but Rohan quickly banished the expression. From him, it was borne of concern. From Hugues, it was one of fear. And Finn didn't mind that so much.

"Finn," Rohan said.

His name in Rohan's mouth sent a wave of warmth and life swirling towards him. Finn swayed under the power of it. Rohan didn't even realize that he was using the innate power he held as an Aeturnal to do this. But something had changed earlier that day. Rohan had become *more* than he'd been before. Just as Finn had. It was ironic that both of them had found acceptance in themselves from talking with men whom they likely had never thought to trust. But there it was.

Rohan reached for him. Physically sought to take Finn into his arms. But Finn held up a hand and Rohan froze.

"A moment," Finn warned. "Let me just…"

Finn felt the Death Magic slithering about him like a giant serpent that could strike out before he could hold it back. He would never allow it to touch Rohan. His beloved. His eyes closed as he drew in the magic bit by bit. The icy cold on his skin left first. He felt his clothes–all black and frigid armor–shift back to his normal soft leggings and tunic. The crown, which wasn't a terribly heavy weight on his head, went next, though there was still the memory of it. Finally, with a *caw* and one final pet, the raven flew away, too. And he was Finn again. Just Finn.

Finn opened his eyes and smiled genuinely at Rohan. "Now."

He stepped into Rohan's waiting arms and the Rirean king held him tightly, rocking him, and kissing his temple. All the tension bled out from Finn. Seeing Marikoth was never pleasant, but this time he'd felt no fear. Instead, he'd had a hunter's thrill at seeing prey. He just needed his weapons–or rather, the Dreadbrood–to go after his erstwhile uncle.

And he will pay. For everything.

In his mind's eye, Finn saw that moment of victory over Marikoth. The Death Mage–no, not *Death* Mage, just a mage, a mage who had stolen magic that was never his, would never truly be his–was on

the ground, staring up at Finn with wide eyes and an open mouth. They would be in the Empire, perhaps on the Wyvern Tower.

The sky above them would be filled with storm clouds and coming night. Lightning and thunder would split it open again and again, wounding the very heavens. In between the *crack* of thunder would be the moans of the Dreadbrood. A constant, low hum of need to rend, tear, destroy. But they would stay still because he bid them to.

There was just one more death that was needed to end this conflict.

Finn would pin Marikoth's left shoulder to the ground with the tip of his staff. A spasm of pain would flow over Marikoth's face as some of his life force began to travel its way up the staff and into Finn. Saliva would fill Finn's mouth. Marikoth was a cold, refreshing drink on a hot day.

Finn would lower himself down so that he was straddling the prostrate form of his uncle. Marikoth's lips would writhe back from his white, sharp teeth. Finn would smile and place his hand–palm down–on the center of Marikoth's chest. He would move away the clothing so that he would touch the cold, almost dead flesh. Marikoth would thrash, but weakly. Weaker than even Tela had in his hands just moments ago.

And then…

And then…

"You have some *control* over it now, Finn," Rohan said, interrupting the imagining. "That's amazing."

Finn snapped back to himself and the vision faded. He swayed a little again in Rohan's arms. The Rirean king tightened his hold on him.

"Yes, or rather, it's more that I've accepted that it is me," Finn admitted as he curled closer against Rohan's powerful body. He could be weak here. He could be uncertain and express his doubts. But, the truth was, he had no more doubts about being Death's Chosen. He was *glad* of it, because what he was could be used to save everyone. "Like you seemed to have done when you restored the stables."

"It's a very small start with those stables," Rohan admitted, but there was pride in his voice. "Leonid has already given me the first request for what I can fix next. Seems like there are some leaks in the officers' quarters."

Rohan should be proud. Not having been told he had a lick of magic all his life, Rohan was learning things that he'd likely thought impossible not that long ago. But as in all things, Rohan was not letting past prejudices cloud his vision. He was embracing who he was. And that gave Finn more certainty about doing the same.

They pulled back from one another with their arms loosely around each others' waists. Finn's eyes darted over to where Hugues had, once more, taken a seat and was smoothing out a scroll. He was pretending that Finn had not terrified him earlier. He was acting as if this was all completely normal.

And it is. This is who we are. Some may wield armies. Some may wield magic. But we wield life and death. We create and we destroy. And if Hugues–or anyone–turns away from us in fear then it is their loss. Not ours.

In explanation, Rohan said, "Before we were so rudely interrupted by Marikoth, Hugues and I were examining the original treaty between the Fae and humanity that might very well give us a way to–not *force* exactly–but make the other sovereigns agree more easily to restore the old Empire."

"And there's something in the treaty that accomplishes this?" Finn asked, blinking in surprise.

Finn was proud that there was no tension in him as he looked at Hugues. His place was with

Rohan. He and Rohan would wed and rule the Empire together. It was *Hugues*–not him–who had to get used to this. Just like with their powers, if Hugues hated him for who his father was then he could leave. Throw his lot in with someone else. But there was no one. Seeing Marikoth like that would make any sane person realize that there was only one side to be on.

It was Hugues who answered, "When all the kingdoms are in equal danger–as they are from the blight–the treaty makes clear that the parties will bind together and act as one."

"It's as if they anticipated what we would face!" Finn cried.

"They likely did know," Rohan said with a grimace. "Some of the people around the table when this was drafted must have understood the integral role that the Aeturnals and their Bonded Ones played in keeping the land balanced."

"But Nafi and Artremaya will argue that this doesn't mean that they need to cede their power forever over to–to you and Finrael, Rohan," Hugues pointed out dryly. "The blight is not quite so bad there as here. Though it is obviously not as light as they are claiming. But it will take a lot more than a piece of paper to move them."

To me and Rohan. He's recognizing that we'll rule together. Now that is progress.

And in that moment, a small, rather dry nugget of history came to Finn.

"Maybe… maybe they don't have to cede *all* power." Finn's forehead furrowed. "Of all things, I think that Lord Gaelyn Camrys might have actually taught me something that is useful."

"What?" Rohan asked.

Finn began to explain, "In one of his long-winded lectures on the great history of the Empire, he spoke of vassal states–"

"Of course!" Hugues jumped to his feet and began to pace. "As vassal states, Bolan and Sultane would have independence–to a certain degree–in internal affairs, but they would bow to you in foreign ones. And things that applied to *all* of the Empire would be in your hands as well."

"That has worked in the past for other kingdoms. At least for a time. Normally, there are civil wars down the line," Rohan pointed out with a furrowed brow. "Especially when down the line things are good again. People easily forget how bad things have been or the reasoning for giving up sovereignty in the first place."

"True." Hugues' gaze slid to Finn and held there. "But that's when Finrael's *unique* abilities come to the fore."

"How so?" Finn asked, though he could guess.

"Unlike those other failed empires where there was rampant civil war that wreaked havoc within the land, leaving them vulnerable to outside interference, that won't happen here, because all you need to do, Finrael, is to drain any rebellious armies to the brink of death, not even to full death, just the brink," Hugues said quietly. "And the terror of that will quash any desire to rebel. It will also stop costly wars and the deaths of innocent soldiers. Win-win."

Finn considered this. Hugues was both right and wrong. People would still rebel. They just wouldn't do it with standing armies. Individuals would stream out to sow dissent or disrupt trade or target officials for assasination. Finn was just one person. He could not be everywhere at once. And while he might learn to use his power in such a way that he could anticipate attacks, if things had gotten to that point, then the Empire would already be falling.

Rohan shifted uncomfortably. "Hugues, I appreciate what you are saying, but these opposing armies are Finn's people, too. You would have him go out like–like a–"

"Strong leader that he is," Hugues objected. "Because by putting down rebellions he would be saving and protecting those innocent civilians who are *not* rebelling. By stopping wars before they

begin, he would be ensuring a lasting peace."

"But Finn is–"

"Rohan is worried that you want the populace to see me as a monster," Finn filled in. "But there is some merit in letting people know what is possible. What I am capable of." He squeezed Rohan's arm, feeling the other man's unhappiness with this, even as a possibility. "But if things get so bad within our Empire that this is the only option we have then we have already failed. We must make Nafi and Artremaya see that it is a *benefit* to them to be vassal states and then convince the people of those kingdoms of the same thing."

"You two are the only ones who would leave your rule for the common good," Hugues sighed. "In some eyes, that would make you the very ones for the job. But being a ruler requires a certain arrogant belief that you are the only one fit to rule."

"That's not true that we're the only ones willing to step aside. Father has. Tell me, Hugues, you have no love for him for many reasons, but even you must acknowledge that he has done what is for the common good," Finn pointed out. "He will support Rohan and me taking over the Empire of the Eclipse Throne and beyond."

Hugues nodded, but then gave Finn a sad smile. "But I think that *you* know it is quite a different thing for a *father* to cede the throne to his *son* than to some stranger."

"Yes, that's true. But I am not the only one ruling. I can assure you that he did not want me with Rohan. To bring back the Aeturnals does dim the Ravenspar legacy," Finn argued. "I was not even announced as Crown Prince of the Empire when I left it. When I return, I will come back as a conquering king. That is not what my father intended for me."

"I wonder how that will be taken. Both of you have rounded ears and no red eyes to be seen though you have plenty of Fae blood," Hugues sighed as he rolled up the scroll. "You will have a hard enough time convincing people that you are qualified to rule based upon your simple appearances, let alone that your rule will benefit them. While the power you wield is but one arrow in your quiver, it is a powerful one and should not be left for too long."

"That's true. But it is only *one* arrow," Rohan said with a shake of his head. "And to think of violence first against our people is wrong. They are *our* people. That means we protect them. If we see them as people to be conquered and cowed, I believe we have already lost the moral high ground at least."

Hugues laughed softly, but it was not mocking in any way. "Moral high ground? That is such a beautiful, but impractical thing for you to want, Rohan."

"It is the type of ruler that both Finn and I wish to be," Rohan stated almost mulishly.

But Finn recalled that Rohan had acknowledged how his power was something that could be used to quell the other kingdoms if they absolutely had to. While Hugues believed his nephew would never suggest Finn use his Death Magic, it was more that Rohan didn't want it on the table until they had exhausted every other possibility. And Finn was good with that.

"To be sure." Hugues rose up, tucking the scroll underneath one arm. "Tonight's dinner is but the first step in what you must do. I will peruse this more closely and alert you to all that I find that may help us."

"You're saying *us*. You're talking about me ruling with Rohan," Finn pointed out. "You've changed your tune, Hugues, since this morning. What happened?"

There was a tense, pregnant pause where Hugues looked as if he would rather swallow glass than tell Finn and Rohan why he had changed his mind. But his shoulders sank and he let out a long sigh. It was as if all the fight had gone right out of him and he looked years older.

"Seeing Marikoth again…" Hugues grimaced. "When he approached your parents, Rohan, he was so different. Clearly brilliant. Empathetic to them. Far seeing. Compelling."

"He better have been to have made them *consider* betraying a friend," Rohan said bitterly.

Hugues hung his head. "Yes, he did the groundwork, but I… I convinced them to sever their ties with Thalanil."

"Of course you did," Rohan growled.

Finn stroked his arm, wincing at the pain in his beloved's voice.

"Yes, yes, of course I did." Hugues let out a dry, humorless laugh. "I told them that Thalanil was *one* man, one Fae, but their subjects were many. Who did they have the ultimate loyalty to? One Fae or the entirety of their people and those that would be born in the years to come?"

Rohan thrust a finger towards his uncle's chest. "And you're *still* advocating it! You want us to betray and use violence and–"

"I realize–" Hugues began.

But it was Finn who cut him off. "I'm sure that Marikoth painted a desperate picture of what Rirea would be facing. Considering what has actually happened, whatever he told your parents, Rohan, likely wasn't far from the truth."

Rohan's lips writhed back from his teeth. "I could not do as they did."

"No, but a true friend would never leave you in a desperate position like I'm afraid my father did to your parents," Finn let out a sigh as he said it. "Let us be honest: would my father have *ever* ceded them more land? No."

Hugues looked up at him surprised. Rohan, too, turned around towards Finn. His forehead was deeply furrowed and he was shaking his head as if to deny Finn's words.

Rohan said, "He told us himself that he was giving food to Rirea at well below costs and–"

"Yes, but for how long would that have continued? And what happened when that need would have doubled, tripled, become a hundred times what it was when he first offered, like it is now?" Finn asked before shaking his head.

"The suffering he would have actually seen without the Wall would have compelled him to continue to assist," Rohan argued, but there was a look in his eyes that told Finn he knew it was more complex than that.

So, once more, Finn shook his head. "No, the Wall would have gone up even if Marikoth had not been a factor. Do you think starving Rireans would have respected an *invisible* border? So much life–plants and animals–just there for the taking! I *took* them. Well, I took their life to keep Tanglewood going. To feed myself, my friends and my family. So I know what people can do when pushed by desperation."

"It would have been difficult to keep order," Rohan conceded and a darkness crossed his brow.

"You know that it would have been *impossible* in the end," Finn sighed. "And the Wall would have gone up to simply keep everyday Rireans out of the Empire. To stop violent clashes between Fae and humans."

Rohan grimaced and pushed the palms of both hands against his eyes. He let out a sound that was a cross between a groan and a cry as he not only agreed with Finn, but added to the dire picture, "And while Marikoth was whispering in my parents' ears, those same fools who welcomed him into the Empire now would have been arguing for Thalanil to abandon Rirea anyways."

"Yes, can't you imagine what they would say? Why are we subsidizing the humans? If they want the food then they must pay dearly for it! Why drain our treasury or force our people to do charity?" Finn's voice was cold and dismissive just as he remembered that fruit vendor's being when Jani had

tried to steal just *one* piece of fruit. " And while Father might have fought off those people for a time–maybe as long as your parents lived–eventually, he would have had to have stopped. The political cost would have removed him from the throne just as surely as Marikoth did. Maybe easier."

Rohan brought his hands down and looked bleak as he confessed, "It would have become too burdensome. Impossible to manage. The Empire would have had to cut us off and turn away."

"Yes, so I don't actually think your parents were wrong to listen to Marikoth," Finn admitted.

"They thought they had no choice," Rohan said hoarsely as he stared off into space.

Finn rubbed his hands together. "Losing my grandfather and the Empire to Marikoth in the way my father did was the only thing that shocked him into action. Without the Wall coming down again, I do not think he would have helped train you, Rohan, let alone ceded his kingdom to us."

"Was this the only way things would ever have been restored?" Rohan asked as he turned to Finn.

Finn laced their fingers together. "I think so. And though it pains me, I almost wish that Nafi had been here when the creatures had come through. So you aren't wrong, Hugues, that they need to experience just how *dire* things truly are."

He and Rohan stared into one another's eyes. It was as if they had come to some pact. Said the quiet parts out loud. Taken on the burden and mantle of leadership.

"Both of you seem to understand the situation far better than I was giving you credit for," Hugues admitted with a very sad smile. "You just hope that people will do the right thing without you having to… make them do it."

Finn still looked into his beloved Rohan's eyes as he said, "Let us all hope it doesn't come to that."

A WAY FORWARD

Ryleth pinched the top of her nose to center herself and clear her vision. She'd been reading books in the crypt all day. She hadn't even bothered to take them upstairs where there would be better light and a nicer view. Fae could see well in the dark so dimness like this with a lantern next to her was more than enough light to read even the most spidery script and the view would have only distracted her. Besides, she was quickly finding that every book she picked was not the one she wanted. Better not to waste time walking up and down stairs and corridors to find another handful of tomes. And this book before her was no exception.

While fascinating in terms of its work on elemental magic, this book does not seem useful to our current problem.

She closed the cloth cover and rubbed the back of her neck. Head down work like this was a pleasure but it was also a literal pain. She carefully turned her head from side to side to stretch the tense, overworked muscles. Under normal circumstances a stiff neck and rumbling stomach would have told her it was time to take a break, but she had no thought of stopping. Finding a way to get to the Dreadbrood was beyond important.

There had to be something in this room that would lead them to the resting place of Death's invincible army. The field where Finrael and Rohan had sensed it was right beyond that back wall. Well, perhaps more than right beyond it. She'd poked herself into other rooms in the catacombs, but this room was the deepest.

Besides, it would only make sense that it was through this room that Death's army waited. She glanced up at the ceiling engraving. Not actually an engraving, but statues that were carved out of the living rock above. Death's Chosen and the Aeturnal heir facing off against the Dreadbrood. She frowned. That wasn't right.

They should be leading the Dreadbrood. But perhaps this is a representation of before. The consequences of breaking the pact with Death. The Dreadbrood threatening to destroy all.

Still it didn't really work from what they knew of the myth that Finrael had fleshed out for her. She frowned more. But the crick in her neck had her lowering her head and massaging the tense muscles there.

Every day the Empire is not reunited, the kingdoms are more and more drained of life. And Marikoth slaughters who knows how many beyond the Wall. There is no time to waste. How long before he gets to Jani or the rest?

She started when a pot of tea, a cup and an egg sandwich wrapped in wax paper was placed before her. The smell of Cook Shelton's heavenly egg, cheese and bacon sandwich on toasted bread had her stomach growling. Not only had she had little view and light, but little food too.

She was reaching for the sandwich already when she mumbled to her unknown savior, "Thank you–Thomas!"

"Hello, Ryleth. Deep into your studies, I see. You must be in raptures with all this material on the Aeturnals," he responded dryly.

It was indeed Thomas who had brought her the food, which would constitute breakfast or lunch or maybe dinner. Thalanil had mentioned to her something about a formal dinner he'd had to attend that night. He'd been sorry to leave her, but it was his duty and just as important as their work. He'd left how long ago? She wasn't sure.

Miles had come to get Thalanil in order for him to bathe and dress. Who knew how long a king would take to do those things? So maybe the dinner hadn't even started yet. In Miles' eyes it was clear that Thalanil should be pampered and shown off. It wasn't strange exactly to see a human enamored with a Fae. But Thalanil's evident affection for Miles was different. He'd smiled broadly at the young man, which had Miles blushing and ducking his head.

"Master Milius has brought you a selection of oh so many things, King Thalanil. He says they aren't as lovely as your own clothes back home, but I think they're rather fine," Miles had babbled. "You look nice in anything really. Even a burlap sack!" He'd flushed hotter. "Not–not that there's a burlap sack waiting for you to change into–"

"I know, Miles." Thalanil had clasped his arm. "You're quite the flatterer. I've never been so complimented."

Miles had tugged at a lock of his hair. "We wish to do our best for you, King Thalanil. All the other monarchs will have brought their nicest things, but yours are–yours are–"

"Yes, they are not available right now." Thalanil had stood up. "I cannot wait to see what you and Master Milius have put together." He'd looked over at her. "I will be back, bright and early, tomorrow to help you, Ryleth."

She'd begun to rise to curtsey, but he waved her down. "I look forward to it. I hope the dinner goes well."

"If they don't leave to get their armies to keep us out, we've succeeded." He'd smiled bravely as he'd said it and then he and Miles had headed upstairs with Miles chattering happily beside him.

Recalling the easy friendliness between human and Fae immediately made her think of how Thomas and Emma and all the rest had not been treated by her, Tela and the others. It had not been the same. She blinked owlishly up at Thomas, who was scanning the room with keen eyes. He might be a bad man, but he wasn't an idiot.

"You look quite a bit better," she said truthfully and was relieved by it.

Though he was still thin, there were no longer dark hollows beneath his eyes. His face was freshly shaved, his hair was clean and cut nicely. There was no dirt ground into his skin. He wore a simple pair of tailored tan trousers, brown leather boots, and a red tunic. Despite their simplicity, his clothes were clearly made of fine materials. They were likely better than he had ever had in his life.

He looked down at her, smoothing a hand self-consciously down the front of his tunic, as he answered, "I'm on light duty. Just running a few meals here or there when needed. Cook Shelton says that I'm not to strain myself."

Thomas sounded proud and pleased as he said the last part. He hadn't been in Aymar's dungeons long, but they had wrecked him physically and mentally. Or so it had seemed to Ryleth. He'd been a gangly thing of bones and matted hair. Now he almost looked healthy. He was clearly being looked after despite not coming into the king's service with anything like a recommendation. But the servants here clearly looked after their own. She was not surprised that Rohan had people working for him

with as generous a spirit as he had.

Is it more than he deserves? He took Emma's life. I don't know what he originally made a deal with the Fae for, but I doubt it was something good. Yet he seems so happy and relieved to be among good people, have enough to eat and a roof over his head. How long before that's not enough for him?

"There's always work to do in a castle," she responded neutrally, "especially with all these dignitaries visiting."

He nodded. "True. Aren't you joining them for their feast? Cook Shelton has been preparing quite the spread. The smells in the kitchen are divine."

"You brought me an egg sandwich so you know I'm not." She smiled and shook her head. Maybe it was a dig he was making at her that she wasn't important enough to warrant being at the dinner, though she was certain if she had asked Finrael or Rohan, they would have made space for her. But her skills were better served here than there. So she answered, "I'm Finrael's teacher, not a politician."

"What's the meeting all about? Or are they just coming to drink and eat together?" Thomas asked.

"I'm sure the servants' grapevine has told you that they are here to form an alliance against Marikoth," she replied dryly.

But it wasn't exactly the alliance that the Queen of Sultane or the King of Bolan envisioned. Rohan and Finn did not need their armies, but for them to simply accept new rulership.

Hugues had come down, looking for more information from Head Librarian Crosley about the treaty that ceded part of the Empire to humanity and the three kingdoms that had been born from that. Hugues' eyes had darted over to Thalanil, who had remained at the table beside her, seemingly unaware of Hugues' looks. But the stiff way he held the pages of the book he was looking through told her he was listening to what Hugues was saying. She thought that Hugues was speaking rather loudly too.

"I need any treaties or documentation regarding the formation of Rirea, Bolan and Sultane, Crosley. Perhaps notes were kept of the meetings? Or early trade agreements might mention something that could be useful," Hugues said.

Finally, Thalanil had turned in his chair to Hugues. "What exactly are you looking for? The documents that would fit the description you just gave the Head Librarian would fill twenty of these rooms."

"I'm afraid he's right, Lord De Clare!" Crosley looked and sounded apologetic. "Not that I wouldn't be willing to find those things for you, but with the crypt being the main priority, I'm short handed and–"

"We have half the university running around on tasks these days. I understand. Perhaps… Perhaps King Thalanil could potentially help me narrow what I'm looking for down," Hugues fidgeted with his robes.

"I would be happy to," King Thalanil stated with grace, but there was a touch of ice in his words. It was clear that these two were not friends and were, perhaps, only uneasy allies at best.

Hugues came over with a large scroll, which he set before Thalanil, unrolling it to a certain part and running a finger along a few lines of text.

"What I'm looking for are any instances when this clause might have been triggered or even referred to," Hugues explained. "You see if we can show that the kingdoms worked together in the past then…"

"I see why you are interested in this." Thalanil nodded as he read. "There are two instances I can

think of where something like this may have been triggered. The first was soon after the kingdoms were founded. They had no standing armies yet and the Empire provided a defense. The second time was during an outbreak of disease. I can give you the dates of those occurrences, Crosley."

"Oh, that would be so helpful! Yes, yes, we can locate the royal records! I can get some scholars on that right away," Crosley said.

"The search needs to start immediately. Anything you find should be brought to myself," Hugues instructed.

"It will be!"

Crosley had then begun shouting for scholars, robes bustling about his figure, as he went to get the royal records. Hugues and Thalanil had stared at one another for long, silent moments before they broke away from one another with Thalanil taking his seat beside Ryleth and Hugues retreating up the stairs.

Crosley had not been back in the crypt since then. She wondered if he had found anything useful to show the other monarchs at the dinner. She took a bite of her sandwich and practically moaned. Buttery, gooey egg, crispy bacon, and melty cheese gushed in her mouth. She chewed with evident pleasure as she poured herself a cup of tea. It had cooled slightly since being boiled so she could immediately take a sip of the bitter brew. She saw that there were some sugar lumps in a folded piece of paper. She dunked one in and stirred it until it dissolved then she drank half the cup in more pleasure.

"You're Finrael's teacher so does that mean you're staying here at the castle? I suppose it does," Thomas answered his own question.

"I'll go wherever he goes," she admitted. "Once things are sorted with Marikoth, I'm sure they'll be moving to Aymar or another one of the Fae palaces."

Though she wasn't totally sure of that as Rirea was centrally located for the new imperial borders.

Thomas' head snapped around to her. "You really think they can take back the Empire?"

She felt a momentary qualm about saying anything else, but this was nothing more than he'd learn from the servants' grapevine. "I do."

"How?" Thomas' disbelief was not hidden. "They say that Marikoth drains the life out of people! Hannah told me that he made her brother and their neighbors into some kind of walking undead!"

"We have our own scholar able to do that," Ryleth said, meaning Christopher, another of Finrael's very interesting stepbrothers. He and Miles could not have been more different. But both were favorites of King Thalanil.

Thomas' lips formed a moue of disgust. "So it's going to be one army of the dead versus another?"

In fact, it was going to be the Dreadbrood against Marikoth so Thomas wasn't far off.

"An undead army cannot be drained of life," she answered. "Hence, it cannot fuel Marikoth's powers against us."

"So we're going to reanimate corpses to fight him?" That disgusted look was growing.

"It's more complicated than that," she said with a touch of frustration.

"It's more magic! More Fae magic! Last thing we need here," Thomas muttered. "I remember when I thought this place was the pits. Lots of it still is, but at least they don't enslave you or starve you or have you freeze in rags. We don't need any more Fae ways creeping in."

He plucked at his nice tunic as he spoke. She grimaced. He wasn't altogether wrong. That was the problem for her with Thomas. Any time he criticized the Fae, he wasn't doing so out of some blind prejudice, but concrete, personal experiences. She could claim that his experience was not the

norm, but that would be lying. Thomas' was likely better than some and worse than others. So why was her dander up at his words? And then she realized.

"King Rohan has been very merciful to you," Ryleth said almost sweetly. "And considering he is part Fae and Finrael is part Fae, one would imagine you wouldn't want to rave against the *Fae* in his castle."

Thomas' mouth shut with an audible click. He clearly hadn't known that about Rohan or, at least, or he hadn't thought of that.

"But I'm sure you have other things to do than watch me eat and read," Ryleth told him as she took another bite of her sandwich and wished she had two more to tuck away. Maybe she could send Thomas for another sandwich for her…

"What are you doing down here? What are all these people looking for?" Thomas asked, gesturing towards all the scholars who moved from bookcase to bookcase, murmuring together and making vigorous notes. "You're all acting deadly serious. King Rohan himself wanted to make sure you were all fed and taken care of so your work wasn't disturbed."

"We're cataloging the library," she half-lied. "It's a great historical find. The most information on the Aeturnals in an age."

"I was watching you. You weren't cataloging. You were going from book to book. What are you searching for?" Thomas insisted.

Not stupid. But still a bad person?

"How long were you watching me?" she asked, eyes narrowing.

"You were the last person I served here for a little while. But I know I'm right!"

She realized that there were other servants dressed like Thomas who were circulating around the room. Egg sandwiches for everyone! Unfortunately, there looked to be no more. She finished the last bite of her sandwich, chewed and swallowed. More hot tea as a chaser told her she was still hungry.

"Would you be willing to go get me some more food from the kitchens?" she asked him.

His head swung around to hers and a speculative look appeared in his eyes. "I'd be willing to do that if you tell me what you're looking for."

"I'll just go upstairs myself then," she sighed and made to stand.

He put a hand on her shoulder. "I have more to offer than carrying dishes, Ryleth! You know that. I helped you in the past."

And it was true. Thomas had been quite quick about learning the properties of plants and where they grew best. He'd learned to mix simple potions and help her minister to the sick.

"I know you did. But you also killed Emma." The last she said while looking into his eyes.

He dropped his gaze from her. "I thought I was doing the right thing. You might have thought Death Mages were good, but no one else did and–"

"Thomas, you killed an innocent. Emma wasn't a Death Mage. She just got in your way," Ryleth cut him off. "You are always looking for an angle. Always. Trying to get out of the deal you negotiated–"

"It wasn't fair!" Thomas' eyes flared with the unfairness of it.

"It probably wasn't. But most Fae *or* humans didn't much care about the unfairness of Fae deals, because what the human was asking for was normally bad," she said. "What did you ask for?"

Thomas swallowed and averted his gaze from her. "I don't have to tell you that."

"No, you don't. But from what I know of you, it was some get rich quick scheme, which probably would have hurt a lot of people," she told him. "There were a million ways you could have *reported* a Death Mage without hurting Emma like you did. But it was the quickest way. So you took it."

"You don't know the desperation of the situation I was in," he protested.

"You're right, I don't. And maybe I would behave terribly too under that pressure. I hope not, but it could happen. But the thing is that we *do* know what you would do and I can't trust you, Thomas," she said. "I would like to be able to pick your mind about what I'm working on, but I can't help but fear what you'll try and do with the information."

"You're wrong about me, Ryleth," he said tightly.

"I wish I were."

The servants were all leaving the crypt, walking up together in a long line, all of them carrying candles. It was then in the greater light that Ryleth saw the rings on the ceiling. She blinked.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Thomas asked.

"Nothing… I… I need to get a closer look."

Ryleth grabbed the lantern that she'd been reading by and murmured the words of a levitating spell under her breath. Her feet left the ground. Thomas didn't gasp. He'd seen plenty of magic performed. But the scholars did let out little squeaks and squawks of surprise as she kept rising up and up and up until she could touch the ceiling.

She lifted the lamp even as she confirmed with her fingers that there were concentric rings in the ceiling. On these rings were the statues. When the rings moved, the statues moved. She looked at the maddening horde of the Dreadbrood and then glanced over at Death's Chosen and the Aeturnal heir. She nodded.

Of course! How clever!

She laid her free palm flat against the ceiling and muttered another spell. This one was for movement. There was a cracking, creaking sound and dust rained down on the upturned faces of the scholars and Thomas below her. The rings began to move slowly at first and then more fluidly. She heard a satisfying *click* when the statues were now in their correct places–Aeturnal heir and Death's Chosen in front of the Dreadbrood–and then with a grinding sound the back wall of the crypt began to lower and reveal a large passageway leading deep into the earth.

Ryleth smiled.

I've found a way to the Dreadbrood.

ARMY OF THE DEAD

Finn surveyed their guests. This was the first time they'd had a chance to dine together despite best efforts to have a casual meal with Artremaya before they sat down for this formal one. Circumstances–and Marikoth–had made that all impossible. Considering how stiff everyone was–including those who didn't know what they had to discuss–made Finn toy with the lovely food on his plate instead of eating it. Well, except for Tearlach. He was never stiff.

Serxio had determined that a round table for the dinner would be the best. Finn and Rohan sat next to one another with Hugues on Rohan's other side and Thalanil on Finn's. Tearlach had been torn about whether he wished to sit closer to *family*–Finn and Thalanil–or by his beloved Rohan.

"But, then again, after the wedding, we will all be family, yes?" Tearlach shrugged and sat next to Hugues.

Finn had half wondered if the Achuvien king was sitting there because he didn't trust Rohan's uncle farther than he could throw him or if he truly just wanted to be closer to Rohan.

Artremaya sat next to his father and Nafi was sandwiched between her and Tearlach. The way Tearlach talked with his mouth full and gestured with greasy hands likely was *not* going to endear the Bolanian king to him, but it couldn't be helped. Besides, at a round table, no one was truly safe from being flicked with food or spit by the expansive talker and gesturer that was the Achuvien king.

Serxio was not eating with them, but instead stood unobtrusively by the door, making sure that every meal arrived how it should. He would join in discussions, but he'd decided that he'd rather not eat. He had explained his theory before the other monarchs had arrived.

"It acknowledges that those at the table are mostly of equal rank. Finn, of course, is a prince and Hugues is a lord, but both of you are crucial to the talks. Plus, with the discussion you are about to have with them I assume you want them to feel like equals," Serxio had cleared his throat.

How this "discussion" was going to be brought up was still nebulous.

"Nafi will likely take the bull by the horns. He's all sorts of suspicious now that he's arrived and King Thalanil and Prince Finrael are here rather than behind the Wall," Hugues had stated. "The enemies I warned him of in my letter are supping beside him."

"His servants have been surreptitiously asking ours what the situation is. They haven't gotten anything out of them other than there is a way to stop Marikoth and this blight, which I told them to say," Serxio answered. "I've also encouraged them to be hopeful and excited about what's to come."

"Who needs a spymaster when one has you, Lord Lemos," Hugues said with an approving smile.

"It shows the strength and loyalty of our people that they can pretend such emotions," Rohan said sadly. "There has been little proof we can turn things around."

"Not true, your majesty!" Leonid–who would be directly outside of the room, guarding them–said

with passion. "You and Finn stopped the creatures. You tamed some of them while Finn destroyed the truly dangerous ones. The Wall is restored to keep *us* safe rather than keep us out. We have a wyvern on the roof. And there's overflowing life in the castle and its grounds. There's so much fruit and vegetables coming out of the castle gardens that they're giving it away."

"It's true," Serxio hastened to add. "Everyone actually *does* feel hopeful. I didn't have to ask them to pretend at all. Just to express what they were already feeling."

"I doubt anything King Nafi is imagining we will ask him for is even close to what we'll say," Finn murmured.

"I'm not certain of that," his father answered, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "Calling them altogether will have triggered someone to have looked at the old treatise. What they will have to give and what they can ask for in return, etcetera. Especially considering they thought they were going up against Fae mages."

"If only that were the case," Leonid grunted. "I'd take a regular Fae mage any day compared to Marikoth."

"They may feel they're looking into the future when they see Rirea. I'm wondering if they will be more agreeable than we think," Rohan said thoughtfully. "I know that Artremaya has been disturbed by what she's seen. And Nafi would have surveyed everything as he entered our lands. Unlike Artremaya, he has more recent memories to call upon to know how bad it's gotten in a relatively short time. So while things may appear all right in their kingdoms now that could change in a few years."

"I hope you're right, my boy, but I fear, if as Thalanil suggests that they have seen what the treatise between all our nations has said, that they will have fashioned arguments against what we are asking of them," Hugues replied dryly. "It would almost be better if we could catch them unawares."

But they were in it now. The meal was proceeding. King Nafi had a taster by his side, a young man with golden skin and tawny eyes, who took a bite of each of the items that were put before the King of Bolan. He chewed everything precisely before swallowing. There was a rather pregnant pause as they waited to see if he was going to keel over from poison or not from every dish.

Queen Artremaya also had a woman who did something similar yet she was less obtrusive than the young man. Maybe because the young man wore flowing white pants, a gold choker around his slender throat, and nothing else while Artremaya's taster was dressed in a full dark green tunic and black leggings, showing skin only at the wrists and neck.

Finn was now seeing the value in Tearlach's decision to anesthetize himself to poisons by eating small amounts of them since birth. There was no taster necessary for the King of Achuvia. Not that Finn or anyone from the Rirean side worried the food was poisoned either. His father had spelled them to make sure poison could not harm them. So he supposed he was being unfair to the Bolanian and Sultanian monarchs. They didn't have a powerful Fae mage to protect them.

But if they did pass from life to death, wouldn't that make it easier for you and Rohan to take Bolan and Sultane, would it not? The raven asked.

The God of Death had flown in sometime between the salad and soup courses and was perched on the back of Finn's chair. It fluttered its wings and rubbed its head against his cheek. Finn did not reach up to pet it as it would appear he was petting the air to everyone in the room. Only Rohan–and maybe Tearlach–would suspect what he was really doing.

Forget treatises on paper so old it should have rotted long ago, the God of Death continued. *No need to convince them that they must act for the common good or their kingdoms will be just as barren as this one, if not more so. Death might be just the thing you need.*

That's not off the table, Finn said with equanimity.

Ah, how bloodthirsty of you, my Chosen!

I think the opposite is true. If the deaths of two will stop the deaths of thousands–tens of thousands or even more–isn't that the less bloodthirsty option? Finn asked.

So you wish to use death strategically? The God of Death chuckled, evidently pleased despite not getting its bloodbath.

I hope not to use it at all, Finn admitted. *But if it must be used, let it be used for the common good.*

Ah, these suspicious royals! And here you are thinking only to kill them if the world would be better for it, the God of Death let out a caw that sounded much like a laugh.

"I must commend your excellent chef, King Rohan," Nafi said, dabbing his lips delicately after finishing off the cream of potato soup that had been topped with bacon bits and a drizzle of basil oil.

"Cook Shelton would tell you that she's far from a chef," Rohan smiled. "But her cooking is always delicious even if it may be plain."

Tearlach dunked a bit of buttered bread into his bowl. "Ah, my wolfhounds would lick the bowl if you let me bring them in."

The Achuvian king gave a dark look at Serxio, who had stood firm against the hounds.

"Your hounds are a little boisterous for such a meal," Rohan said apologetically.

"Besides, they're happier by the fire gnawing on the beef bones Cook Shelton gave them along with Tyreon and his family," Finn reminded him.

"Ah, your dainty wolves, King Thalanil! They are too clean to truly be vicious fighters," Tearlach scoffed as he used the remainder of the bread to wipe the bowl clean just like his wolfhounds would have done. "You should let me take them hunting with my dogs! That would show them a thing or two."

His father, who had taken a delicate sip of soup, answered sweetly, "It is good that you *ask* to do such a thing as Tyreon and Skye would likely hunt *you* and your dogs absent my request."

Tearlach let out a bark of laughter and pounded the table with one fist. The dishes and silverware danced. Nafi cast an annoyed look at him as his bowl of soup had nearly "danced" into his lap. And what a lap it was!

If his outfit that afternoon had been stunning, what he wore now was twice that. It was a confection of sunlight with oranges, reds, yellows and whites. Rubies were sewn into the fabric creating elaborate sun designs. Every time Nafi moved and the light hit the rubies there was a rainbow-like effect on the table, the wall and sometimes on others in the room.

"Your generosity has been extraordinary considering the troubles Rirea faces," Artremaya said. "Not that you cannot overcome them. You've shown *extraordinary* gifts since I've been here. But still to expect to be treated as if the world is not blightedjust shows the depths of your hospitality."

While Nafi might be the sun, Artremaya was dressed like the moon in silver and white. Her dress was off the shoulder. A single large diamond set in a broach. It was pinned to her shoulder and a matching circlet with diamonds adorned her head. Her hair hung over her shoulders in elaborate braids, with beads set with more diamonds.

"I know that this is little compared to what your two kingdoms could offer in return," Rohan answered with a slight smile. "But we do our best to make our friends feel welcome."

"Most would think your statement a little too blunt, Queen Artremaya," Finn's father said with a cool, red stare at her.

Though it had not been the famous Fae tailors that had dressed his father that night, but only the mortals Milius and Miles, Finn thought that his father had never looked lovelier. He was dressed in a

dark green velvet coat that had a high collar, the tips of which rose up to the level of his cheekbones. The coat was form-fitting over the arms and chest, tapering in at the waist and then flaring out in two sections that extended just below his knees. Underneath it was a silver wrap shirt that looked like crushed diamonds had been incorporated into the material. It scooped low at his throat to show some of his creamy skin. His long hair was drawn up into a single braid that swept down to his mid back. He had none of his crowns or jewelry here, but Rohan had offered him the use of a silver circlet made of joined ravens with emeralds for eyes.

"I don't know what its provenance is, but it was thought to have some connection to the Ravenspars. It seems fitting that you should wear it, Thalanil," Rohan had said.

Finn had accompanied Rohan to see his father and hand over the gift. Thalanil–who had been sitting before a mirror having his hair brushed and braided by Miles–had risen to look at the circlet. His fingers brushed along it.

"Yes, it is one of ours, but also one of the Aeturnals. I believe it was something worn by a long ago ancestor who wed an Aeturnal. None of the Ravenspars who married the Aeturnals survived the breaking of the Empire. They went to the grave with their Aeturnal partners," his father said with sadness mixed with reverence. "I have read of this circlet. It is known as *Ziryn* in the ancient tongue. It means Flight. It is said to allow its user to fly though… it is empty of power now."

"Ah, I see that. There is a small well." Rohan's eyes had gone unfocused. "Here, let me fix that."

Rohan put a single finger against the circlet and the emerald eyes of the ravens glowed as it was re-enchanted. "Should be good to go now. You can fly away from tonight's dinner."

"I would not leave the two of you to face it alone." Thalanil took the box that held the circlet and closed it before placing it on top of the dressing table. "I am proof of the danger that you face against Marikoth at least. Though I have never met Nafi or Artremaya. They may not realize my strength… or the strength it took to take my Empire."

Finn reached out. "They will know."

Miles, who had been silent up to this point, said, "You look awfully nice, Finn. Does the circlet you're wearing have a name, too?"

Finn's hands reached up to the circlet around his head. It was strands of gold woven together inset with rubies. He had chosen to wear black that night, not green like his father, but pure velvety darkness. He was encased in black leather boots to his knees. His leggings were black velvet. His shirt was form-fitting with no sleeves, but with a high collar. He had on fingerless black gloves with a thumhole. They wrapped around his forearms up to mid-bicep leaving his shoulders exposed.

"You do look very well, my son," Thalanil said as he studied the unusual outfit. "It suits you."

It did. And he'd found it in the section of Rohan's closet that had been set aside for his things, but no one knew where it came from. Milius had stared at it, blinking rapidly. Miles had cocked his head to the side. He'd given kind words about it, but Finn knew it wasn't usual attire. But, as his father had said, it suited him.

Leonid had remarked, "It looks like it's easy to move in. Good if a fight breaks out."

"You look beautiful, Finn," Rohan said again; his eyes showing that he truly did think that. "The circlet is from my family again. It was worn by a long ago prince. His name was Faren and people were said to come to him for succor and wisdom."

Finn smiled up at Rohan. He was beaming really. He loved that Rohan had given this to him to wear with such thought behind it.

"I am sure that you wished to give Finrael one of your king's crowns, Rohan, but it is better you don't at this time. After you are married it will be appropriate and it should be something Aeturnal, I

think," Thalanil remarked dryly.

"I would give Finn my own crown if he wanted it," Rohan answered simply.

"I'm sure," Thalanil said. "But there must be some protocol–"

"Father–"

"No, Finn, he's right," Rohan interrupted gently. "If I act with anything less than full and formal protocol with you, others might think that you and your father bought your safety."

Finn shook his head. "I suppose I see what you mean. But people like that will always think something."

"I do not wish to give them anything even slightly tangible. Besides," and here Rohan cupped Finn's face, "I want to do everything right with you. All the formalities. All the romance."

Finn blushed. "Then I shall not stand in your way."

And seeing now how Artremaya spoke so openly about Rirea's poverty made Finn think that his father and Rohan were right. He didn't think ill of Artremaya. He thought she was likely a plain spoken leader.

"I suppose so, King Thalanil. But I've found that the pretty lies are the most dangerous ones," she answered just as coolly. She put her elbows on the table and rested her chin upon them. "With the loss of your kingdom to a madman and the world outside these walls blighted, should we waste our time on niceties?"

His father went very still at her words about his lost kingdom. Finn reached under the table and gently squeezed his father's hand. Thalanil held it tightly back.

"Truly, we were asked to come here to overthrow you, good Thalanil!" Tearlach chuckled, breaking the uncomfortable silence that had fallen. "But here you are already overthrown. Our job is done for us, I suppose, in some people's eyes."

Tearlach was looking pointedly at Nafi.

Nafi is not the only one with spies, the God of Death clucked. *And his spies actually found out something.*

What did he find out? Finn asked.

Nafi has no army to spare. Coming here at all was a desperate act. He has no heirs and the nephew he wished to succeed him was struck down by disease. He is still sprightly but age has shadowed his once youthful brow and others chafe under his leadership, the God of Death said. *He hoped to gain allegiance to keep his seat. Now he sees more desperation here than even he feels.*

Ah, he hoped for aid, but has none to offer? Finn asked.

Secure his kingdom and he will send his armies to Rirea's side against the dread Fae. War is good for business, the God of Death tittered.

Nafi lifted an eyebrow. "Whoever the enemy is, there most certainly is one that we all face, yes? That it is not Thalanil or his lovely son makes my heart happy."

Here Nafi placed a bejeweled hand over his heart.

"I'm surprised you can lift that hand," Tearlach said. "It's so covered in baubles. But perhaps you had to take all you can carry so as to not find them gone when you return."

Nafi gave him a narrow-eyed look, but then laughed. "Yes, well, there is a difference between niceties and being rude. I should not be surprised that *you* don't know the difference, King Tearlach."

"Gentlemen." Rohan barely lifted his voice. It held censure in it, but also firmness. And as if proving the point that he was destined to be above Nafi, at least, both the King of Bolan and Tearlach quieted though Tearlach had a tight smile on his face.

He plays the uncouth buffoon with them, but he's not that at all, Finn thought.

No, our good Necromancer still has a bit of a chip on his shoulder though you have eased it, the God of Death stated.

"We come here as friends and allies. There are plenty of forces and people who oppose us that we shouldn't bring enmity into this room," Rohan continued.

The Rirean king was dressed in crimson and gold. His boots were even dyed blood red. His long crimson coat that draped to his knees had gold braiding and buttons. His shirt looked like a burnished sun. Both the coat and shirt collar were flipped up to frame Rohan's handsome face. He was freshly shaven and his hair was brushed back in waves. Like Finn, he wore a gold circlet with a single red ruby in the center. Finn knew that the Rirean king was more comfortable in his plain leathers than this finery, but Finn thought he looked magnificent. Just as a king should look.

"What *are* we here for exactly?" Nafi asked, still a little shrill and sniffy. "Not to kill Thalanil clearly."

"You could not have done that even if you'd sent every single one of your soldiers to the Wall," Finn found himself saying.

"I did not mean to offend your father, Prince Finrael." Nafi held up his hands.

But Finn did not back down. "Oh, I believe you did. Because you want to pretend as if you *have* an army at your back. Any army. But you don't, do you, King Nafi? So causing arguments and offense is your way of avoiding acknowledging that."

Nafi fussed with the sleeves of his coat. His eyes were cool, but he was clearly thinking of a response that wouldn't reveal too much.

"All this plain speaking has taken his breath away, I think," Tearlach chuckled. "Or maybe he's considering whether *lying* is the best course or not."

Hugues' gaze snapped between Tearlach and Finn. Even Rohan's eyes widened slightly. They'd guessed there were issues with the King of Bolan, but this was obviously news.

"You think you know so much about me. But I was called here to help *you* and I don't see how I can yet," Nafi finally said.

"We don't need your army. Any of your armies," Finn told him and Artremaya. "So neither of you need to worry about that."

Nafi did not look relieved by this.

Artremaya turned her graceful head to Finn. "I saw some of what you can do on the battlefield today, Prince Finrael. You wield what the Fae call Death Magic, yes? The same as Marikoth Ravenspar does? The one currently occupying the Empire?"

"To compare us is…" Here Finn looked over at the raven at his shoulder and reached up to brush his fingers over its feathers. He knew the others saw it when there were faint gasps in the room. "To compare us is to compare night and day. He has stolen Death Magic, which is why it is destroying him, while such magic is my birthright."

My Chosen, the God of Death murmured and rubbed its beak against his cheek again.

"Marikoth will use this magic against anyone, which is why my father's greatest strength–his powerful life force–was his greatest weakness with Marikoth. And an army made up of living, breathing humans or Fae is actually the worst thing in the world one could wield against him," Finn continued. "He would just drain them dry as he burned the world to cinders. No, there are only *two* things that can stop him."

"I cannot imagine I have any of those things," Nafi admitted.

"Nor I," Artremaya added.

"You don't. The first thing is if he simply destroys himself, which he will eventually do by using

Death Magic. He's already in his death spiral though he does not let himself know it," Finn further explained. "But he could still cause much too much damage if he's allowed to simply burn himself out. So it's really the second way that's the only viable one."

Here Finn paused. He felt something. Saw something. Heard something. It was like a chink of light in a dark room. A room that had been dark so long that the light seemed more like a dream of light than the real thing. He looked at the closed door to the dining room. He heard muffled voices outside.

"That sounds like Christopher," Serxio remarked as he went to the door to look out. "He wouldn't interrupt unless it was important."

"Finn?" Rohan asked.

Finn had half risen from his chair even though he didn't recall doing it just as Serxio opened the door.

"... the undead are restless and then a scholar comes running into my lab and says there's an army of the dead down below," Christopher was saying to Leonid, who was stationed outside the door. "Ryleth opened a doorway and some fool servant ran through it and–"

"The Dreadbrood has been found," Finn whispered. "The door's open."

THE HAND OF A STRANGER

Christopher found himself backing away from the door as every single person exited the rooms in a steady stream. Monarchs and their servants alike flooded the hallway. His back hit the opposite wall.

He tried to hide his displeasure and unease at being around so many people, especially people he did not know. Living with his unpredictable father all those years had taught him that people were dangerous. Knowing their habits, their strengths and weaknesses, and more was necessary to assess their threat level to him and keep it as low as possible. These people were rulers, used to controlling the lives of everyone around them, and caring little what happened to the small cogs. Not that he was a cog. Not in his soul. Not in his heart. He would become a machine unto himself. But not yet. He still had so much to prove.

He tried not to feel the burst of relief that erupted in his chest when he caught sight of Serxio making his way through the crowd towards him. It was almost a dance as the foppish young lord squeezed between monarchs, sidled around a lord, and broke apart two servants.

"Excuse me, your majesty. So sorry, your highness. Just need to get through here! One moment. Ah, Christopher, you've caused a bit of excitement," Serxio laughed as he stepped up to Christopher's side.

"You do not appear upset at my interruption of the evening," Christopher remarked.

He was rather grateful for that. He hardly thought of food or atmosphere himself, but he wasn't so solipsistic not to understand how important it was to high stakes diplomacy that had been taking place inside the dining room. But here he'd come and broken it all up.

Serxio rubbed his hands together. "I think this is the best thing that could have happened. Talk is not cheap–I'd be the last person to devalue it–but seeing is believing."

"Seeing *what* exactly? An army of undead?"

Christopher would rather like to see that himself. He'd like to control that or know how it was done. He couldn't help the slight jealousy at how easily Finn was able to manipulate the dead while he lumbered about in comparison.

He had been annoyed at being interrupted in his work, but maybe he'd been wrong to be. The undead had suddenly become restless. Shuffling and jerking. Moaning and shedding skin and dried bits of themselves all over the place. His attention had been on them when the scholar had dashed into his lab, breathing so hard that she could barely speak. She was white-faced with fear, instead of flushed by the run, which had told him the interruption was warranted. It had been on the tip of his tongue to say something highly acidic to her, but those words had died. Instead, he'd gotten everything out of the scholar that he could before she collapsed down on one of his lab chairs.

Then she'd seen the undead.

They were no longer behind the bars of the little jail in the corner. It was not necessary, though keeping control of them was causing a headache to spear through his brain as he tired. That headache was not helped by the shriek she'd let out. Rather ridiculously, she drew her legs up against her chest and pointed a shaking finger at his specimens.

"I control them," he'd told her. Surely, since she was a scholar she must understand research! "There is no need to fear."

She kept shrieking. Evidently, she wasn't a very good scholar. Luckily, one of her fellows came in to get her and he had headed upstairs to reach Finn and Rohan to report what she'd told him.

"Not undead… Well, I'm not sure what you would classify the Dreadbrood," Serxio said. "But we're about to find out."

Finn and Rohan were the last to exit the room with Thalanil by Finn's side. The Fae king nodded to Christopher, which caused another warm burst in his chest. Another *friend*. Yes, a friend. He had four of them now. Finn, Serxio, Leonid and Thalanil. Miles did not count. Miles was more of a limpet. Rohan was kind to him, but he was still potentially dangerous. Though as long as Finn cared about him he was sure that Rohan would keep him on. Still, friend was not yet a word he'd attach to the Rirean king. Christopher was *dependent* upon him. Rohan was his *benefactor*.

Finn came over to Christopher looking more beautiful than normal and a little strange. *Otherworldly* would be the word that Miles would use. He was so dramatic and romantic in his language though, but it did apply to Finn in that moment.

His stepbrother glided more than walked. His green eyes shimmered with banked flames. The black outfit he wore hugged his lithe frame like a second skin. The darkness of it accentuated the white in his hair. He looked regal too and completely untouchable. Christopher found himself standing up straighter. Serxio was too, he noted, though the foppish young lord was great friends with his stepbrother.

"Christopher," Finn said, his voice different as well. It held a note of dusk and command. "Where is the opening you spoke of?"

"The crypt. The whole back wall came down after Ryleth moved the statuary on the ceiling. It was some kind of puzzle lock," Christopher explained what he had been told. "Is there really an army of the undead below?"

He dropped his voice low as the other monarchs pretended not to listen. But it was clear by the widening of eyes and sharp intakes of breath that they very much were.

"The ceiling statues! Of course!" Finn turned to Rohan. "Should we take them down with us?"

He was evidently referring to the other monarchs. Rohan surveyed them with keen, intelligent eyes. The eyes of a strategist.

"I doubt we could stop them from coming. They came out into the hall eagerly enough. But they must understand the danger," Rohan said.

Finn nodded. He extended a hand and a staff appeared in it. Christopher blinked. This was new. He hadn't seen Finn do this before! Finn's eyes had gone black for a moment when he'd manifested the staff. Rohan then did something similar, but there was a golden crackle and then Lightbringer, his magical sword, appeared strapped to his back.

"Very good, Rohan," Thalanil murmured with an approving nod of his head.

"I've done it before, but it seemed to come easier this time," Rohan said. A pleased smile crossed the Rirean king's lips. "It felt as if it were already with me. I was just making it seen."

Thalanil nodded. "It was said that every enchanted weapon or piece of armor was attached at

some level to the Aeturnal who created it."

"But I did not create the sword," Rohan pointed out.

"No, but it recognizes you as the one who is meant to wield it. The one its creator intended for it to serve all those millennia ago. Every hand that has held it before yours, Rohan, was but a temporary custodian. You are its only true rightful owner," Thalanil answered.

"What is all of this?" The King of Bolan asked sharply as his dark eyes were fixed upon the sword. "Rohan is *human.* We have no magic!"

"Not any longer," Hugues muttered.

"Humans *never* had magic, Hugues," Thalanil said with a disapproving press of lips. "You were given stewardship of our lands because you didn't. Likely, *another* punishment by the gods for the theft of Death Magic. Place our lands in the hands of mortals who will all too quickly die and their descendants forget the responsibilities they owe."

Christopher expected Hugues to reply angrily, but instead, he merely inclined his head. "Perhaps you are right, Thalanil. But the De Clares were never *just* human in any case."

"Clearly, they were not," Thalanil agreed.

"But what are you saying?" The King of Bolan demanded.

Without hesitation, Rohan answered, "I'm not human, Nafi. I am the Heir of House Aeturnal."

Nafi's eyes narrowed. "House Aeturnal… the Fae dynasty that preceded the Ravenspars on the Empire of the Eclipse Throne?!"

Rohan inclined his head. "The very same."

"You must have something to say about this, King Thalanil!" Nafi spun towards the Fae king.

Thalanil lifted an eyebrow. "What would I have to say?"

"If he's the Heir of House Aeturnal then he's… he's…" Nafi looked slightly strangled.

"The rightful king of the Empire? Yes," Thalanil answered simply. "And not just the part that houses the Empire now, but *all* of the Empire, Nafi."

"You mean he is High King then?" Artremaya asked. "Over all the old lands, including Sultane and Bolan?"

"Yes," Thalanil answered simply.

Artremaya didn't look altogether as shocked by this. But, then again, Christopher knew she'd been there for the leashing of the undead and the Wall coming down. Rohan had undoubtedly used his sword then and she'd seen Finn's magic. So she must guess that the two of them were *not* like her and Nafi.

"It's what we need to talk to you all about," Hugues said dryly.

Christopher had thought the uncle of the Rirean king was on the outs with everyone, especially Rohan and Finn, but both men nodded their agreement with Hugues' words.

"You called us here to talk about *his* tyranny." Nafi pointed at Thalanil. "And the Wall that he created that is causing havoc in Rirea and the rest of our lands!"

"Unfortunately, I was incorrect in my understanding of the true cause of the blight and so much more," Hugues admitted. "But it is still good you are here, is it not, Nafi? Our problems are far more dire than even I understood."

"Our Nafi needed to go *somewhere*," Tearlach chuckled darkly. "Or he might not have his head to put all those jewels on."

"You keep making insinuations about the safety of my throne. But I assure you, Tearlach, that it is as safe as yours!" Nafi snarled.

Tearlach laughed. "Then it is very unsafe indeed! I get challenges every week. They would be

every day if I were at home. But I defeated all comers. What about you, Nafi? I know you have *not* defeated your challengers. The question is if you actually *can*."

"You are a barbarian with your constant blood challenges and–"

"He's not," Finn cut off Nafi.

Tearlach's eyes strayed to his stepbrother. A look appeared on his face–for just a brief flicker of time–that Christopher knew. He recognized it as one he'd had on his face a time or two with Finn. It was shock that someone would defend him, someone would step between him and an enemy, someone who cared for him. Serxio looked over at him at that moment and Christopher shifted from foot to foot. Did he recognize the similarities too?

"He's nothing like what you think, Nafi," Finn continued. "You would do well to listen to what he says and not react emotionally to it. Tearlach sees things as they truly are. Whether we want them to be or not."

Nafi sniffed. "I am well aware of my situation."

"Yes, and Tearlach knowing it and naming it doesn't make it suddenly more true than not. It is better we know where each other truly is than pretend strength we do not have," Finn counseled.

Yes, this was just like his stepbrother. He encouraged one to expose one's belly. It felt insane to take him up on it every time it was offered. And yet, it was always the best thing to do. Finn forgave. Finn protected.

"Ah, cousin!" Tearlach sounded unutterably pleased. "He would disagree with your last part. Pretending strength, so he thinks, will get him more in these negotiations. But he does not know your good heart. You would protect him from his own foolishness."

"We have him at a disadvantage, Tearlach. We have taken the risk of trusting each other and found it well placed," Finn responded almost gently. "He isn't there yet. It isn't foolish. It's just–"

"What one does. But it is the wrong move with you," Tearlach said with a slow smile. "So wrong."

"You are dressed like a raven king, Finrael," Nafi said to Finn. "Like your namesake, I suppose, but I have never seen a Ravenspar like you. But even if you don't appear as others of your kind, the Fae have never been our protectors."

"My son–" Thalanil began in a none-too-friendly tone.

But Finn cut him off with a gentle hand on his shoulder. "You are right, Nafi. I am… different. I can understand your suspicion. I sense you've had to watch your back more now than at any point in your life. If you cannot trust friends and family then accepting the offer of help and protection from a practical stranger seems insane."

"A Fae protecting me from *other* Fae," Nafi sniffed. "That is always the way of it."

He wasn't altogether wrong, Christopher thought. But while he understood Nafi's reaction, Tearlach was right about his stepbrother. If there was a downtrodden or misunderstood person out there, Finn would protect them. Even this arrogant, sniffy man would likely stir his stepbrother's pity. If he raised Finn's ire though…

"Bah, enough talk, I wish to go see the Dreadbrood." Tearlach pushed through the crowd and took Finn and Rohan's arms, looping them around his own and continued, "Come, we must make the myth real. And then these others will understand far more than words could ever make them do."

"Leonid, walk with Christopher and I. We may need your sword arm," Serxio demanded.

The Guard Captain rolled his eyes. "I am accompanying the *king*, Serxio. I am not your personal bodyguard."

"Rohan has Finn! He hardly needs us. You know I will leap to his defense, but I need you to keep

me alive to do that," Serxio argued. "And Christopher here must live to finish his research into the undead. And who knows what else he will discover. His mind must be protected!"

"I believe you have a point as to Christopher, but as to *yourself*, Serxio, we shall see if you merit any defense," Leonid muttered.

Rohan and Finn were already far ahead of them so Leonid sighed, but joined in line with the two of them.

Serxio's lower lip wibbled. "You cannot be serious? Have I not proven my worth many times over?"

Leonid's lips were surreptitiously twitching. "As I said, we shall see."

"You wound me to the quick, Leonid!" Serxio flung his head back and proceeded to ignore Leonid despite the Guard Captain's many attempts to chivvy him out of his ill humor.

The whole group of them marched down to the basement and as they did so, Rohan warned them of dangers ahead, "I warn you that we are going into the total unknown. The Dreadbrood are undoubtedly protected by spells, traps and who knows what else."

"Death's Army? Death is a transitory process through which we move to the next world," Nafi pointed out. "It is not a *being*."

"Oh, I most definitely assure you that they are a being," Finn contradicted.

Out of the corner of his eye, Christopher thought he saw the black wings of a raven ahead of them, leading the way forward. They passed Christopher's laboratory and, though he desperately wanted to go back to work, he could not miss out on seeing this undead army.

It will help my research!

The Bolan and Sultane monarchs walked down the steps into the catacombs with more uncertainty than Finn and the others. Nafi grimaced as they passed through the gates. He drew his robes tight around his slim form. Artremaya made a gesture he recognized as a blessing as they passed by Rohan's parents.

"You can feel how ancient the castle is down here," Artremaya remarked. "The weight of history is all around us."

"And above us," Nafi muttered. "Are we sure that this place won't collapse on our heads?"

"These catacombs have stood for millennia," Thalanil answered. "And they will stand for many more after you and your descendants are not even dust on the wind."

Christopher wondered what it must be like to be a Fae. The ages passed by under their feet like the minutes did under his. They had time to study, to learn, to know so much more because mortality did not dog their steps. A fierce desire to find a way to escape his own mortal coil.

Understanding death will help me defeat it.

As they passed down the hallway and headed deeper underneath the earth, Finn and Rohan explained why the land was blighted. A power stone network that had laid dormant was the cause. The overflowing life in the current Empire needed to be drained and moved to the other less fertile areas.

"A mage able to use Death Magic drains the excess life and feeds it to the Heir," Finn said.

"And the Heir fills the network of power stones. This way all the land is balanced, which means fertility and prosperity for all. It was so successful that only now has the system broken down millennia after it was last tended," Rohan explained.

"I have seen these power stones," Artremaya murmured. "They are considered sacred though memory has been lost as to why."

"We have no such things in Bolan!" Nafi insisted.

"Nafi, you have one in the center of your main temple," Hugues remarked dryly, and with a little less friendliness towards the monarch. "The one you call the True Stone."

"That was sent by our Goddess Maya. Its light has led us for thousands of years! It has nothing to do with this–this power network," Nafi insisted.

"Is it still glowing?" Rohan asked softly.

Nafi's lips pressed together as if he feared what words would fly out.

"No, it is not," Artremaya said with a lifted eyebrow. "That is why Nafi's kingship is in question."

"Artremaya!" Nafi snapped. "How dare you suggest that I—"

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm just stating what I *know*," Artremaya retorted.

"Evidently, I am not the only one with spies in your land, Nafi," Tearlach chuckled.

"Finn and I put more energy into the network, but I am uncertain whether it will reach as far as Bolan's True Stone. I kept the power nearby to fuel the Wall," Rohan told him.

"And you are suggesting that you could make the True Stone glow again?" Nafi scoffed, but there was a hopeful look in his eye.

Hope against hope.

"Yes, if I could identify it in the network," Rohan nodded. "I can see the network in my head rather like a map. I will just overlay it with a map of the old Empire."

"What does the Dreadbrood have to do with anything?" Nafi asked as they started down the staircase to the crypt.

Finn and Rohan explained how the use of Death Magic by Ravenspars in the past without due regard or respect to the God of Death had caused that god to become very angry. The Necromancer–one of Death's emissaries–had brought the Dreadbrood against the Fae because of it. All life would have perished if not for the agreement that the Empire would be broken into four pieces and ceded mostly to the humans. The Aeturnals were exiled. The Ravenspars would be put in charge, but they would be cursed to have children throughout the ages that were Death Mages. These Death Mages were to be killed or else the God of Death would return with the Dreadbrood and end what it had started long ago.

"If the Dreadbrood is to be the method of our demise then–then why are you glad it has been found?" Artremaya asked.

They had reached the bottom of the stairwell. The crypt appeared before them. Christopher saw Finn and Rohan lift their heads towards the ceiling. He, too, looked up and blinked.

Statuary did indeed adorn the ceiling. There were two statues that looked eerily like Rohan and Finn standing ahead of an army of monsters. The statue that looked like Finn stretched out a hand towards the opposing side, commanding the dread army to attack.

"Because history gets twisted and gods change their minds," Finn answered Artremaya. "The Dreadbrood is our way to defeat Marikoth and restore the Empire."

Before anyone could respond to that, there was a shrill cry emanating from the yawning opening in the back wall.

THE MAKING OF A MONSTER

Earlier…

Ryleth lowered herself back down to the floor of the tomb. Everyone was staring at the yawning mouth of the tunnel that led down, down, down into the earth. No light showed beyond ten feet from the entrance. The darkness was inky black and acted as if it was resisting the light. Even her ability to see in the dark was thwarted by it.

Ryleth's feet touched the floor. She opened her mouth to call one of the guards to tell Finrael and Rohan about her find, but then she saw Thomas. He had taken the lantern from her table and was over by the entrance to the tunnel. He was holding the lantern out before him, peering inside.

"Thomas! What are you doing? Get back from there!" Ryleth called.

"Where does it lead?" Thomas asked, his voice echoing into the tunnel.

"It doesn't matter where it leads! That's not for you!" Ryleth responded harshly.

He turned his head towards her for a moment. The look of contempt on his face was enough to have her jerk back. And then she realized the tone she had used. It was the one she had always used with him when he was disobeying her.

When he was a slave.

Thomas turned his back to her and stepped into the tunnel. "I'm sure it's important. King Rohan will reward whoever finds out where it leads."

"Thomas, don't be a fool! This leads to…" She stopped. She didn't know if Rohan or Finrael had explained about the Dreadbrood. She could not make that known to this group of scholars. "It's a secret passage! There's bound to be traps. You'll get hurt."

"That's not your concern," he said without even looking back at her.

Ryleth was tempted to use magic to bind him and yank him away from the tunnel mouth, but she saw how tense and tight the people were. Not just from the tunnel appearing, but *how* it had. She'd used magic to reveal it. Eyes flickered to her then away.

I am a Fae. While Finrael and Rohan are Fae, too, they have rounded ears and no red eyes. And Thomas is not my slave any longer. He is a free man to make his own mistakes.

The desire to let him find his fate for once and, undoubtedly, pay for it was strong in her. But she made her way through the tables and chairs, past the sarcophagi of the king and his Bonded One. Thomas had already walked a dozen feet inside of the tunnel.

"Something's glinting here! Is it–is it *gold*? I think it's gold," Thomas' voice rose with excitement and longing.

Alarm sprang into her chest. What could possibly be *gold* in there? No treasure. Maybe armor? Could some of the Dreadbrood have been left at the tunnel mouth to guard the others? Could the

"gold" he thought he was seeing be their armor glinting in the light of the lantern?

"Thomas, stop! It's not safe!" she cried.

But he acted as if he hadn't heard her and kept going. Maybe he hadn't. Or maybe he was ignoring her. Either way, he was walking forward with determination. She hustled after him.

"What *is* this?" Thomas murmured.

"Thomas, don't touch it! Step away!" she yelled.

Thomas had been shuffling forward with the lantern raised one moment and then, in the next, there was a shout cut off almost in mid-scream. The lantern fell from his hand. The glass shattered as it hit the stone floor. The oil spread out in a pool of flames. People gasped and cried out, pointing fingers at where Thomas had been.

"What happened to him?" Someone cried.

"It took him! It took him! LOOK!" Another screamed.

For a moment, in the bright light of the fire, she saw a figure that stood nine feet tall with curving horns growing out of a bull-like skull, but this bull stood on two legs. One massive arm curled around Thomas' body. The young man was thrown over the creature's ash gray shoulder. Gold armor covered its chest and hung down in a skirt to its knees. Its arms and legs were bare. Its feet were hooves while its hands were claws. The armor looked old, worn, but it still glittered.

Then the fire went out and darkness fell again. There was no sound. She expected to hear the *clip-clop* of the creature's hooves as it walked deeper into the tunnel with Thomas as its prize. Or, perhaps more disturbingly, as it came out of the tunnel and into the crypt.

But there was nothing.

Ryleth conjured will-o-wisps of light and sent them into the tunnel. They reached the place where the thing and Thomas had been. But neither was there. It had taken Thomas to some terrible fate, she was sure of that.

He's earned it. I tried to warn him. He ignored me! Thomas has been fated for a bad end since even before I met him. It's not my problem! We should get the king and Finrael–

"Go tell the king and Prince Finrael what has happened! The way to the Dreadbrood is open! The undead army is below," she cried, leaving her own concerns about secrecy behind.

They have to know what's happened here! And I must head below. Damn you, Thomas!

Ryleth whispered words that coated her body in a luminous shield. She took a dagger Leonid had given her from the armory.

"I think it's Fae!" he'd told her almost shyly. "The design of leaves and thorns on the hilt and the runes there at the bottom."

She'd taken it from him and looked at those runes on the base of the hilt, running her left thumb over them.

"Vrith," she said.

"Vrith?" He tilted his head to the side.

"It means *bite* in the old tongue."

Leonid laughed. "I can see that wicked little thing could bite a few people."

"You're right that this is a Fae weapon. An Aeturnal Fae weapon actually. It probably was once enchanted, but ran out of power long ago," she explained as she balanced the dagger on her hand. "I should ask Rohan if he'll restore the enchantment. But let's see… ah! Yes, it worked!"

She'd run her fingers along the blade and an icy sheen of frost had appeared on the metal.

"Frostbite, I think!" she laughed delightedly. "It's a cold-spelled weapon. I'm betting that it doesn't just do slash, stab and frost damage, but also cuts through armor. Freezing it and making it

brittle. Fascinating!"

"Makes sense! Well, it's right to see it in your hands then," Leonid said.

"I'm sure King Rohan wouldn't wish these to just be given out to anyone. Aeturnal weapons are rare and this one is beautifully crafted," she said reluctantly and made to give it back to him.

But Leonid pushed it back towards her. "You're Finn's tutor! You're going to be by his side. I'm sure the king would want you to have the best weapons to protect him."

"I do not think that Prince Finrael needs my protection though I am happy to give my life to protect him." Her hand curled around the dagger's hilt. It felt like it was made for her size hand. She really wanted the dagger, but still felt she should ask for Rohan's permission. "I sincerely hope that we won't encounter anything more harrowing than dust and book mites in our studies, Leonid. But I will hold onto Vrith for now and ask Rohan about it later."

"That sounds like a plan." Leonid smiled.

She had been intending to ask Rohan about it the day Marikoth had sent the creatures after them, but there hadn't been time. And then she'd dove into researching and hadn't surfaced. Now she was glad she had Vrith by her side. She drew her fingers along the edge of the blade, feeding some energy into it. This would likely last for a few hits. If Rohan had refilled it, it would have lasted for ages. But this would have to do.

"Go! Tell the king!" she shouted again.

She didn't wait to see if she'd been obeyed. She headed into the tunnel. It felt like the darkness swallowed her once she was out of the reflected light of the crypt. She had conjured another will-o-wisp that floated along ahead of her by a foot. She kept the glow of it low so that the light wouldn't precede her too far.

The creature saw me. Saw all of us. But it just took Thomas and left. But it didn't seem afraid. Why would it be afraid? How does one kill something already dead?

She crouched low as she walked. Her ears were pricked for any sound other than her own breathing and heartbeat. The sour taste of fear and anticipation filled her mouth as she followed the large, sloping passage. It was over fifty feet across and twenty feet tall. She could easily imagine the Dreadbrood walking in lockstep through here to line up in neat little rows deep under the earth only to go to sleep and wait to be woken up.

She directed the will-o-wisp down to the floor to look for footprints of the creature. But the floor was clean of dust, of all debris really. If the others in the crypt had not reacted to the creature–and Thomas hadn't been missing–Ryleth could almost have believed she dreamed it.

Was it there to stop anyone from disturbing the Dreadbrood? Or to stop the wrong *person? If so, why hasn't anything attacked me?*

The air was getting colder as she descended even though it should have been getting warmer. It was surprisingly dry as well. Her breath frosted the air ahead of her. She shivered and tried to keep her body loose even though she wanted to draw in her limbs to protect them. But there was nothing to protect them from other than the unnatural cold.

The floor, walls and ceiling of the tunnel were completely smooth. The stone work was exquisite. It could have been newly made, but it had been here for who knew how long. Like Aymar, there was a sense of timelessness to it and also a sense of great age. Ancient was a term that could easily be bandied about by the Fae, but the Aeturnal structures really were that.

She lost all sense of how long she'd actually been in the tunnel, following it down, until another tunnel intersected the one she was on. The freezing air rushed over her as she jerked her head to the right and to the left. She'd stepped right out in the small t-intersection without meaning to. She

retreated, heart in her throat, expecting to hear the whoosh of a blade cutting the air where her head had been.

But there was nothing.

No attack. No growl from an undead throat. No slicing of the air by a sword larger than her.

She remained crouched, listening, looking, waiting. But finally she realized nothing was going to happen. Heart thundering in her chest, she split the will-o-wisp into two and sent one down each corridor.

They were narrower than this main one. The smooth stone was the same until the will-o-wisp to her right picked up on something lying on the ground. She ordered it to lower. When it did so, she realized it was a handkerchief. Freshly laundered.

Thomas!

Maybe he had dropped it as a breadcrumb for someone to follow. Or maybe he had just gotten lucky and it had fallen out of a pocket. Whichever was the case, Ryleth knew which way to go.

She commanded the will-o-wisp that had gone left to reform with the one to the right. She started down the right passage and immediately the silence was broken by a *crank* then a *clunk* then a wounded cry.

"No! No! Please!" Thomas yelled.

Ryleth ran towards the sound of his voice. There was an arched doorway at the end of the corridor. One of the doors was open. There was a flickering blue-white light coming through it. She shifted her grip on Vrith, readying it for a fight, while she dropped the will-o-wisp and formed a fireball in her left hand, ready to hurl it at the undead monster. Undead things were *dry* so they *burned*. Or that was her hope.

She kept low as she approached the door, pressing her back to the wall as she glanced inside. What she saw made no sense to her. It was a rectangular room with the narrow end being by the door. The center of the room was empty. The ceiling was made of a single crystal that let out that eerie light. But it was the walls that had her freezing. They were covered in two-foot by two-foot squares. There was a single handle in the center of those squares as if they were cabinet drawers that could be pulled open.

And that was exactly what they did do. They pulled out long, rectangular boxes. Except they weren't boxes, they were coffins. And the creature–which was very real–had put Thomas in one of those coffins.

Why is it putting him in a coffin? He's clearly not dead!

She saw Thomas' hands flailing above the lip of the coffin as the creature was trying to stuff his arms in so it could slide into the wall again. Thomas' head and chest rose up as he strove to get out of the coffin, but the creature used one of its large clawed hands to pin Thomas inside and used its other hand to start pushing it in.

Ryleth didn't hesitate. She sent the fireball at its head. It exploded and the creature's horns were on fire. She rushed in with Vrith drawn. She slid low on the ground and sliced the backs of its legs, cutting the tendons there. If she couldn't kill it, she needed to break it down. Make it so it couldn't walk, then make it so he couldn't strike.

"Thomas, get out!" she screamed.

The creature had both its hands by its burning face. This was the time for Thomas to get out of that coffin–or whatever it was–and rabbit away as fast as possible. She jumped to her feet. Thomas was sitting up in the coffin, desperately trying to crawl out of it. He was making this low, moaning sound that was sheer terror. She saw him squirm onto the floor. The creature didn't appear to notice–or

care–as she had all of its attention.

Only the tips of its horns remained on fire, but instead of that being annoying or painful, it only made it look more terrifying. Its face was beastial with heavy jaws and serrated teeth. Only thin strips of dry skin adhered to the skull. But the muscles in its massive arms were still there and each finger was tipped with five claws. There was also a two-handed longsword strapped to its back, but those claws could just as easily eviscerate her. It didn't move to grab the weapon. It just started walking towards her, ignoring the damage she'd done to its legs. Those hooves still functioned. Thomas fleeing out of the room was the last she saw of him before the creature obscured her view of anything else.

She stretched forward with her left hand to send another fireball at it. Breaking it down seemed a far harder thing that she'd considered. She'd saved Thomas so perhaps simply getting past it and running away was the goal now. The fireball left her fingers, but the creature moved out of its way. The fireball hit the back wall and the creature kept coming.

She dodged to the right, thinking to skitter around it, but it was *there*. One large step covered half a dozen of hers. She dodged left, but one of its large hands caught her around the waist. She sliced at its arm with Vrith. The blade left a brutal cut–down to the bone–in the flesh, leaving it coated with frost. This would have had a live enemy screaming as its life's blood geysered out of it.

But the creature was not alive. It did not scream. It did not react at all. Not even with anger. It swept her up even as she slammed a handful of fire into its maw, but, again, no response.

And then she was being tossed into a stone box. The air rushed out of her lungs and she was stunned. That was all the time the creature needed. It shut the coffin into the wall, just as it had wanted to do with Thomas.

Terror gripped her as she felt the press of stone all around her. Her hands immediately went up above her head to touch the ceiling. They stopped much too close to her face.

What is this? Does it think by putting me in here that I'm… what?

The urge to use her magic to escape this small, confined, pitch black place was huge, but she didn't do that. If the creature was standing outside of it, all that would do would cause it to shove her back in. But if it thought she was handled then it would lumber away and she could escape.

The coffin was flooded with the strange white-blue light. She gasped and covered her eyes with her forearm as going from complete darkness to this light was blinding. She blinked rapidly. Her eyes were watering, but she was able to focus. The whole top of the coffin was that same strange crystal she'd seen on the ceiling outside.

What is this? What's going on?

Her skin started to tingle then go numb. Vrith fell from her suddenly nerveless hand. It clattered against her side. She watched with growing horror as her black skin started to *gray*…

And she realized then what was happening. This strange coffin. The eerie light.

I'm being turned into a Dreadbrood.

RUN

Thomas ran. The majority of his life had been running. Running away from being the second son of a tradesman on the brink of poverty. Running away from his thievery from his grandparents. Running away from the string of failed business ventures that had almost taken his life.

The Fae deal had stopped him from running. For a time. Ryleth had taken him on, singling him out to assist her. And that had been good. For a while. But he was still a slave. He couldn't be a slave forever.

He had to try to make his lot in life better. So what if that was at the expense of others? Wasn't that how it worked? To get ahead, someone else had to fall behind. A rich man's steps were cushioned by the backs of those he walked over to get to his fortune. Only those who were already well-off could pretend that life wasn't like this.

So even though he wasn't doing anything bad–or worse than anyone else–it was just that he had the most terrible luck. Everything he touched went wrong. From the grain he tried to sell cheap that was contaminated with fungus to the fact that a neighbor had randomly seen him enter his grandparents' home when no one should have been there. Even Emma had just happened to overhear him and Tela talking about what to do about the Death Mage in their party. That time he had not run. He had continued forward. Removing her from his way.

Removing her…

Removing… her…

She just wouldn't let it go. She would have ruined everything! And he'd already thrown his lot in with Tela. If he let Emma go then she'd have told Rohan and Finn everything. They'd have killed him for sure! So killing Emma was really saving himself. Yes, that's how it was. Absolutely.

He might see her face in his head all the time. Those eyes, pleading with him then filling with pain and disbelief and, finally, knowledge that she was going to die. He kept replaying that portion of his life. That small portion. Over and over again.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't.

He didn't know what Emma had done to get her deal with the Fae, but it was, undoubtedly, as bad as what he'd done. Probably worse! And, again, he had just been defending himself against future death!

He and Tela had run. But running with her had not led him to greater prosperity or safety. They hadn't provided for him in the religious order. The order hated humans more than regular Fae did, and that was saying something! Instead of being seen as Tela's partner who got things done, who was willing to sacrifice to make sure that no Death Mages lived, he was simply treated as Tela's tool. A tool that could be used by anyone. Nothing and nobody special. A slave again.

So he'd had to provide for himself. Those old books with the fancy tassels had been covered in dust. Selling them should have been simple, easy and danger-free. Yet, once again, someone had seen him so into the dungeon he'd gone. Something about selling national treasures of the Fae! It was ridiculous! Was he not selling Fae objects to the Fae? What was anyone really losing?

And then, of all people, Ryleth had showed up again. In the last place he'd expected. The dungeon. Rotting beside him. But she had a bloody magic wolf come to get her out.

She had felt pity for him. Despite everything. He'd known that. She had been the only one to actually care about how the humans were being treated. Not that she'd done much about it. But he'd known that guilt would lead her to help him. And it had! Plus the *incentive* of him not waking the guards, but whatever. They'd run to Rirea together.

And, once more, he had been serving the rich and powerful, instead of being rich and powerful himself. But it hadn't been that bad of a job. In fact, it had allowed him to hobnob with those who might be of use to him. Nobody noticed a servant until that servant overheard things he shouldn't and offered not to tell for a few coins or maybe more than a few. He'd been overhearing loads of things since all the royalty had arrived. He just hadn't yet had a chance to cash in on it.

But then the secret passage had opened. Well, Ryleth had opened it. And he'd been right there. At the right time and the right place. Finally! In a castle as old as this there had to be treasure tucked away. If he got to it first then no one would notice if any of it was missing. Not to mention, he could prove how brave he was to anyone who mattered. And then he'd seen the gold. The flickering allure of ancient gold just there. Waiting for him. Waiting…

Except it hadn't been gold.

It had been the armor on a monster. And he'd been snatched up and sent to his doom once more. He had truly believed it was all over. The monster was putting him into a coffin! He couldn't get away from it no matter how hard he tried. He was going to die! DIE! And everything he'd ever wanted or fantasized for himself would be forever out of reach. He would die an unremembered *servant*. A nobody.

But then Ryleth had come after him. *Again*. And she'd saved him. Told him to run. The one thing he was so good at.

So he'd run blindly down the pitchblack hallway, banging into the walls, stumbling onto the ground. He expected Ryleth to come after him. To give the monster the slip. Of course, she could conjure some light too. That would help. But then he fell into an open space. He lay there, stunned for a moment, and he saw it.

The light…

It was the light at the end of the tunnel. It would lead back to the crypt where all the people were. Likely, Finn and Rohan and all those important, powerful people would be there by now. He'd run to them and tell them about the monster.

And Ryleth.

He looked back at where he'd come from. She wasn't there, huffing and puffing, gesturing for him to keep going and not to stop. She wasn't there.

I'll go tell them what's happened! They'll save her!

His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth as he imagined speaking those words to Rohan and Finn. Surely, they wouldn't blame him! She'd told him to go so he'd left. He had no weapons and no training. Besides, it was a monster! A magical, horrible monster! They couldn't blame him for running…

Someone would tell them though that he had gone inside the tunnel despite Ryleth telling him not

to. Someone would tell them that he had ignored her words and *that* was why Ryleth was in real trouble now.

Because of him.

Maybe Rohan wouldn't want a servant who caused so much trouble. One that put his friend in danger. Maybe Rohan would rethink giving a murderer like him a helping hand.

Why had he gone into the tunnel? If he'd only waited then this wouldn't have happened to him! Ryleth would be fine and not… not… He had the worst luck. The worst. Why had she gone after him? Why did she care?

He stared at the light. He could run right to it. He'd be safe. Safe.

He turned away from it and crept back down the hallway he'd run down moments before. He kept one hand on the wall and crouched low. He barely allowed himself to breathe. He was going back for Ryleth. He wasn't going to run away this time. Not without being sure that… that there was nothing else for him to do. If he could help her then… then he would.

And if he couldn't help her, well, then he couldn't. It would be what it was then. He would have killed another one of Rohan and Finn's friends.

No! No! He would have *bravely* attempted to rescue Ryleth! He would. He would do it. He must do it.

Why did she have to come after him? Why did he have the worst luck?

He saw the light underneath the doors before he felt the edge of the doorjamb. He pressed his right ear against it. He listened. Nothing. No Ryleth screaming. No monster roaring. No pants of pain. Nothing.

I have to open the door to see if she's still alive.

But was that what he had to do? Really? Because if she was alive then she'd be making noise! The monster was likely in there. Hulking over Ryleth's dead body. Blood and brains everywhere.

Thomas rocked back and forth. He should run. He really, really should. He wanted to weep! He wanted to scream! He wanted to… he had to open the door.

Holding his breath, he slowly pushed one of the doors open. There was no creaking, thankfully. One inch. Two. Three. He held his breath. It was open enough for him to dart his head in. He imagined the monster slamming one of those feet down on his head, cracking it like an egg. But he looked in.

No one was there.

No one…

He pushed the door open further. The monster was not there! His shoulders slumped in relief. But where was Ryleth? Could she be invisible? Maybe she'd turned herself invisible to hide and the monster had left! But wouldn't it have passed by him? But where would it be hiding? The only thing in there were the coffin drawers. What if the monster put Ryleth in one drawer and it was in another?

"Ryleth?" he whispered.

Nothing.

He stepped into the room.

"Ryleth?" He raised his voice slightly.

Was there a thump?

"Ryleth?!"

A definite thump.

The noise was coming from his left. Was it from the drawer the monster had tried to put *him* in? Yes, yes, it was.

“Hold on!” he told her.

Did he hear a thump behind him? He cast a glance over his shoulder. Was that drawer opening in the far corner? He wasn’t going to wait to find out. He yanked at the drawer that Ryleth was in. The coffin was heavy. The monster had opened it so easily.

He pulled with both hands. It shifted, but then snicked back into place. Ryleth’s thumps had become more frantic.

“Hold on! I’m trying!” he gasped.

There were definitely sounds coming from behind him. The monster was likely sliding itself out of the wall and he hadn’t gotten Ryleth out yet! He braced his feet against the wall and yanked with all his might. The coffin flew out and so did Ryleth.

She threw herself out of the coffin onto the floor. She was cradling both arms against her chest and let out a sharp cry when they were jostled by the fall. She held her arms out in front of her. In the strange blue-white light, he didn’t notice what was wrong with them at first. But then he saw that her normally black skin was gray and it wasn’t the light doing it.

“What–what happened?” he gasped.

“You came back,” she whispered, turning to him. “Thomas, you came back.”

“Of course, I came back! I thought you were coming right after me and when I saw you weren’t…” He stopped and shrugged.

How much of this was the truth and how much was a lie? It shouldn’t matter. He’d come back. But he didn’t want to chance lying to her.

“Thank you,” she breathed and then she made a terrible moan and curled forward in agony.

“What’s wrong?”

He tentatively touched her back. She hissed in pain.

“I-I don’t know. I think–I think it was turning me into one of them,” she whispered. “Into one of the Dreadbrood. Oh, gods, the pain!”

Thomas looked around sharply at her gasps of agony. But, though he had imagined the creature there, they were the only ones here. At least… one of the coffins began to slide open.

“Ryleth,” Thomas’ voice was high and tight, “we’ve got to run!”

WHITE

The opening to the passage was large enough to march an army through, but Finn thought there might be another way out. Just like with the catacombs themselves, he guessed that there was an alternative exit.

"What is this place?" Nafi asked, rubbing his arms as if chilled.

"The crypt of the last Aeturnal king and his Bonded One," Rohan answered. "And *that* is new."

He was pointing to the passageway. Finn felt a wave of desire to run towards it. He imagined himself dashing into the dark with open arms, a smile on his lips, and black eyes dancing. It was a disturbing image in some ways. It made him feel like a creature of dread places.

"It's hard to believe it was hidden," Tearlach grunted as he took in the size of the opening. "Did the bookcase even wobble when you were fussing at it, Finrael?"

"It didn't," Finn admitted. "It felt completely solid. But the passage was behind it all along."

"Aeturnal workmanship. It is flawless." His father was staring up at the changed statues on the ceiling.

Only now did Finn realize that they were on circular tracks that could be moved. Absent already knowing that, he doubted he would have ever figured it out. Now he and Rohan were *leading* the Dreadbrood against the Fae army rather than the opposite way around.

"It's rather brilliant," Hugues remarked. "Only if you know the real story would you know that the sculpture is wrong."

"And you'd need magic or a very high ladder to get up there to look," Rohan agreed.

"They went inside!" One of the scholars burst out as she stumbled over to them. She pointed a shaking finger. "The servant and the Fae mage."

"Ryleth?" Finn asked.

"She told him not to go, but he wouldn't stop. And there was something in the light of his lantern before he disappeared. Something awful." She shuddered and lowered her head into the collar of her robes.

"A servant that ignored all warnings and wandered into a black passageway?" Leonid grimaced. "Who does that sound like to you?"

Serxio, Rohan and Finn all said at the same time, "Thomas."

"Yes! Yes, that was his name," the scholar said, looking amazed that they guessed.

If only it was amazing…

"Who is this Thomas?" Artremaya asked as her eyes glided over the statuary up above.

"Trouble distilled into human form," Rohan growled. "Gods help us. He *would* be the one to stumble into trouble."

"Stumble? He ran right into its embrace!" Serxio huffed.

"What exactly happened to Thomas?" Leonid asked the scholar.

"You said you saw something in the light of the lantern. What did you see?" Finn asked gently.

He could tell how shaken she was as she trembled and rubbed her arms repeatedly.

"It looked like *gold*," she whispered. The word "gold" should never have sounded so horrifying and yet it did. "And then it moved. It was armor on something…" She made a motion before her as if to describe the height and width of the something she'd caught a glimpse of. "It was huge. Monstrous. I saw it only for a second in the light and then they were both gone!"

"One of the Dreadbrood must be awake," Finn said. He turned to Rohan. "I dreamed about them the other night. One of them opened their eyes. That must have been real."

"They've been waiting for you. I sensed from the first that it would take little to disturb them," Rohan agreed.

Waiting for me? Yes, and I've been looking for them.

"Only the three of us should go down the tunnel." Finn gestured to his father, himself and Rohan.

"Agreed," Thalanil said.

"You have brought us down here to see this Dreadbrood and I will see it!" Nafi insisted.

"That was before we realized they might be awake, King Nafi," Hugues reminded him. "We want you to see them, but not be attacked by them."

"If there really is an army of undead monsters down that passage, how safe exactly are we here?" Nafi pointed out.

"He's right, Prince Finrael. I would rather be by your side if such an army were to approach me," Artremaya pointed out. "And yours as well, King Rohan. I've seen you both in battle. I believe there is no safer place for me to be."

"And I dare you to try to make me stay here while you all go have fun," Tearlach rumbled in amusement.

"Fair enough. I should have known you wouldn't agree to miss out on possible death and destruction, Tearlach," Finn said with an affectionate pat on his arm. "But you don't have your sword with you."

"Oh, but I do! *You* are my sword, Finrael. You are everyone's sword!" The Achuvien king smiled broadly. "For you are destined to control the Dreadbrood. And if you cannot then we all will die horrible deaths."

Nafi blanched. Artremaya lifted an eyebrow. Rohan shook his head.

"There will be no dying today," Finn said.

They were so close to the Dreadbrood now. Moments away from seeing them and Finn felt both a sick sense of anticipation and a vague sense of hysteria. Would he *really* be able to control the Dreadbrood? Was he mad to think he could do such a thing?

"If anything were to happen, I will teleport them away, Finrael," Thalanil offered softly so only he could hear.

Finn smiled at his father. "Thank you, but I will do this. I am meant to."

His father simply inclined his head before he began to murmur in the language of the Fae, weaving spells with his fingers so that they would be prepared for use immediately.

"You can't leave us here, your majesty!" Leonid cried as he realized that he wasn't part of the group chosen to go.

"Leonid is right for once," Serxio added.

"For once?" Leonid hissed at him.

"You hurt my feelings before. I won't forget it anytime soon," Serxio sniffed.

"Someone has to defend these people, Leonid, Serxio," Rohan said as he patted both men's arms. "And if something does go wrong, I need individuals here that I can trust to come after us."

Leonid's shoulders sagged. "Understood, your majesty. But it is a hard thing to ask of your Guard Captain."

"As it is for me, too! To let you walk into danger while we remain behind? Terrible!" Serxio cried. "All the blood in my veins is yours, King Rohan! I long to spill it for you!"

Rohan smiled. "I would have no blood of yours be spilled, Serxio. Not today. Not ever."

"Blood would never come out of that outfit," Leonid muttered.

Serxio glared at him, but then asked Rohan, "Do you really need us back here? It's not just an excuse to leave us out of things, is it?"

"I do need you here. Keep people safe and keep them from going down there," Rohan said.

"You need not worry about keeping me away, Serxio, Leonid. I should get back to my studies," Christopher said. "I wish to see the Dreadbrood, but *after* it is controlled."

"That is a good idea, Christopher," Finn said. "Now we need to go find–Ryleth?! Thomas!"

Finn rushed forward as Ryleth and Thomas hobbled out of the passageway. Thomas was practically carrying Ryleth. Her dark skin had turned gray and ashy-looking in places. Her eyes were filled with an agony beyond comprehension. Finn's heart lodged in his throat. What had happened to them? Why had he waited to go after them for even a second? He dashed to their side.

"What's happened?" Finn asked as he took Ryleth's injured arms by the wrists gently, ever so gently. He was afraid that if touched the affected areas that the skin might literally turn to ash and break off of her.

"Dreadbrood," she breathed with great difficulty and he feared it was not just from running down the tunnel. "Tried to–to turn me into one."

"What?" Rohan breathed out. He was on her other side.

Finn's heart flipped in his throat. She was almost turned into a Dreadbrood? How? Who did it?

"Coffins and a strange light. It took Thomas…" She seemed unable to say more.

"She saved me," Thomas admitted shamefacedly. "I thought…" He swallowed and forced himself to go on, "I thought I would please you, King Rohan, by going into the passage first. And I saw *gold*… except it was armor on a monster!"

Finn could easily imagine Thomas believing he would be rewarded for his foolhardiness. Add gold into the mix and the man was a goner. Ryleth had rushed right in after him. Despite all that Thomas had done, Ryleth seemed to have a sense that she was responsible for him. Considering how badly humans were treated in the Fae Empire, he understood a little why.

If only it was Emma or someone more worthy of the help.

"If Ryleth had not come after me, I would be one of them now," Thomas said.

"You came back for me, Thomas," Ryleth finally spoke. "You saved me. You could have just kept running."

"I almost did," Thomas muttered, and Finn wondered if he meant to say that out loud as he blanched after it was spoken.

"She needs to sit," his father said as he brought a chair to her.

They lowered her into it. His father conjured three will-o-wisps to give him greater light as he examined her skin minutely. The gray parts looked partially desiccated. When his father brushed a finger lightly over those parts, Ryleth shuddered. She let out a soft cry when he moved over the area where the gray flesh met the normal colored skin.

"What's wrong with her?" Rohan asked. "Can you heal it?"

Finn did not like his father's expression. It was one of despair, but it quickly was smoothed over to one of inscrutability.

"I have never seen anything like this before," his father admitted. "The skin and flesh looks leeched of life."

"Perhaps I can change that. Put life into her?" Rohan suggested.

But Thalanil shook his head. "You can put as much water as you like into a broken pot, but the water will not stay there."

"I am a broken pot?" Ryleth laughed softly. "Yes, I like that analogy. Ah!"

The last was a cry of pain. Ryleth convulsed for a moment. Thalanil murmured a spell. There was a burst of green light that flowed over her body, but though it stopped the convulsions, Ryleth was left trembling and coated with cold sweat.

"That's the first stage of the transformation," it was Christopher who spoke. "Thalanil, turn her arms to the left so that I can see more."

His father did so. Ryleth groaned. There was some black cracking to be seen. Finn's stomach churned even as his heart went out to Ryleth.

Please let her be all right! If I had been down here earlier, would the Dreadbrood have done this?

"Yes, yes, that's what I would expect," Christopher muttered. "She must be brought to my lab. Thalanil, I could use your help."

"But I–"

"Father, go with Christopher," Finn said. "We don't know how long…" Finn swallowed and stopped the words that were going to come out, which were, "We don't know how long she has left." And instead, he said, "The faster Ryleth is cured, the faster she'll be out of pain."

His father searched his face. Finn made sure there was none of the doubt in his own abilities there. In truth, Tearlach and Artremaya were right. He either controlled the Dreadbrood–and therefore being by his side was the safest place to be–or he failed and they all died. Either way, the length of the passage was not going to save them.

"The gray areas are spreading," Christopher remarked with a dry precision. His voice did not hold alarm or fear. He was just stating facts.

"Oh, by the gods, he's right!" Ryleth moaned. "I thought once I was out of the coffin that it would stop. But it has not!"

Thalanil gathered Ryleth up in his arms. "Christopher and I will heal her. Finrael, I know that you will deal with the Dreadbrood."

Finn only nodded. He was afraid his voice would crack otherwise. His father then reached out to Christopher. A swirl of golden light surrounded them and they disappeared. He must have teleported them to Christopher's laboratory.

"Would you like me to–to come with you and show you the way?" Thomas' voice did crack as he offered to lead them into the tunnel.

"No, just explain what is ahead of us," Rohan said.

Whether the Rirean king took pity on Thomas or feared the other man would simply be a hindrance, Finn didn't know. But Thomas' shoulders relaxed and he gave a half smile as he explained everything he'd seen in great detail.

"Now take yourself back to the kitchens to rest, Thomas. You've done enough tonight," Rohan said.

Thomas quickly bowed and scuttled off. Finn wondered if tonight's adventures would stop him from being so foolish. But he doubted it.

Rohan turned towards the three monarchs and his uncle. "Are you certain you still wish to go after what you've just seen?"

"I'm not sure what I've just seen! Turning her into the undead? How can that be? Is Marikoth down there?" Nafi asked.

"No, Marikoth is not, but we're not exactly sure what is," Rohan stated. "We are discovering almost as much as you are."

"I am with you to the end, nephew," Hugues said dryly. "And I must admit that I wish to see what is at the end of this tunnel and its connection to our family."

"I still wish to come," Artremaya said firmly. She placed her hand where her sword should have been. Not finding it there, she grimaced, but said, "This is the army that will save us from Marikoth. I would see it tamed."

Nafi tossed his regal head. "I will not remain behind either. I am not afraid."

Tearlach chuckled. "You have nothing to remain behind for. If you don't get your people to believe in you again, you might as well go out into the hedgerows and starve. Let us go!"

Tearlach was the first to stride into the darkness. Rohan grabbed a lantern as did Nafi from one of the tables as they entered the darkness. Finn quickly asserted himself at the head of the party with Rohan beside him and Tearlach just behind them. None of them spoke. Their footsteps were faint, but Finn did not like how they echoed. At least one of the creatures was awake. Surely, it would hear them coming a mile away.

"The t-intersection they mentioned," Tearlach grunted. "Do you wish to go see where Ryleth and Thomas were nearly turned?"

He'd taken the lantern from Finn so that Finn had both hands free to use the staff. He thrust the lantern down the right hallway. They saw no hulking monster there.

"Not right now. I need to see the horde," Finn said.

He felt pulled down the central hallway. A cold wind blew up from below. It should have been hot. It should have been dank. But instead it smelled of ice and snow. Finn closed his eyes and sent a pulse of magic into the staff. The red crystal lit up. He started walking ahead. Rohan gave his lantern to Nafi while he joined Finn at the front.

"Do you see the raven?" Rohan asked.

"I did earlier. I think I hear it flapping up ahead," Finn responded softly.

"When we get there, you'll know what to do," Rohan told him, all conviction and surety.

Again, Finn nodded and didn't speak out loud. He really did hear flapping up ahead. Faint, but there. The raven remained just out of sight as the hallway continued to slope down. Rohan's belief in him was warming, but it also meant more pressure to not fail. Why did he suddenly feel so incredibly unmagical? They were on the precipice of his destiny and he felt nothing.

Rohan's hand fell lightly on his shoulder. "Everything will be all right."

Finn smiled at him. "I love you."

"And I love you."

They passed many intersections that were as dark and mysterious as the first. Nothing waited for them there. It seemed to Finn that they had been walking forever. When they'd gone to the field, they'd taken a cart. No such luck this time.

"How much further?" Nafi asked and grimaced.

It was clear that he wasn't used to walking such long distances or, at least, not such long distances

in his fancy shoes that were ornate, but were narrow at the toe and heel. Artremaya wore boots beneath her dress with small heels. Fashionable yet practical.

"It was three-quarters of a mile as the crow flies from the castle," Rohan said. "Since we also have to move downwards, it will likely be at least a mile or a mile and a half."

"Just think of when we have to walk back up," Tearlach said with a jaunty grin.

Nafi groaned. "I should have had my guard come with me. They could have *carried* me back up."

"Perhaps if you ask Finrael nicely, he'll have one of the Dreadbrood do it," Tearlach poked.

Could I control them to do that? Finn wondered. *I could control the undead in Christopher's lab to that extent. But they are nothing compared to the Dreadbrood in terms of power and sophistication.*

"You're having great fun acting as if you're not afraid of this undead army, Tearlach, but I doubt–ah!" Nafi's voice echoed as they suddenly left the tunnel and were standing on a balcony overlooking a massive cavern.

They couldn't see the contours of it, but it was clear to Finn that it was a huge space. His hearing told him that the space was vast. Winds blew around them. Cold as the highest mountain peaks. Their breath frosted the air.

"Good gods!" Artremaya hissed as she wrapped her arms around her. "Why is it so cold?"

Nafi took a few steps back. The lantern swung wildly in his hand as he was having a hard time keeping hold of it. "I cannot feel my fingers!"

Hugues' teeth were chattering. "I feel like all the warmth is being sucked out of me."

Even Tearlach's shoulders were hunched over as he bared his teeth against the cold.

Rohan grimaced, but he seemed able to bear the freezing cold better than the others. Finn hardly felt it at all. If anything, it felt refreshing here. And that's when he realized what was happening.

"Because it is. Actually, the *life* is being drained from you," Finn told them.

"What?!" Nafi's eyes widened in alarm.

"Aye, I can feel them tickling my soul. The Dreadbrood are *here*," Tearlach stated and there was a touch of awe in his voice.

"They are," Finn agreed. "Just down below. But I need you all to stay back by the entrance to the tunnel."

"I would see them," Tearlach muttered and took another step forward.

The wind whipped up more fiercely and he grunted in pain.

"Tearlach, no!" Finn cried. He put one hand on the massive chest and looked up into Tearlach's face. "Please, cousin, I must gain control of them first and then you may see them. But not yet."

Grimacing fiercely, Tearlach relented and drew back the step. "I would not have them think they bested me."

"They haven't," Finn assured him. Dropping his voice, he added, "And you shall be their protector after all of this."

Tearlach gave a sharp nod. He then joined Artremaya, Nafi and Hugues by the variable shelter of the tunnel. The wind though had barely died down and Finn saw Rohan grimace more this time.

"My beloved, you should go back too," Finn said. "You have more life force to give, which is why you are able to keep going, but you're being drained like the rest of them."

"I know, but I will not leave you alone in this," Rohan said firmly.

But I am alone in this. I should have come here alone, Finn realized. *That's why I've felt wrong this whole time. This isn't a sightseeing expedition or a way to satisfy others' curiosity. This is me accepting who and what I am.*

"It's all right," Finn said. "This is my task. Mine alone. Yours is to restore the land after I destroy Marikoth. You cannot help me here, Rohan."

Rohan's eyes flickered all over his face, searching for something. This time Finn did mean what he said. He felt the rightness in his words. He rested his hands on Rohan's broad shoulders.

"I am sure, Rohan. I know this is my destiny." The words came so easily now. "But I must be Death's Chosen at this moment. Not your love. Not my father's son. Not even the person that *they* think I am."

He tilted his head towards the others by the tunnel.

"I know who you are." Rohan caressed his cheek. "Don't you forget it."

Finn turned his head into that familiar, treasured touch. "I won't."

With another grimace, larger than the others, Rohan turned away and headed towards the tunnel leaving Finn alone. Well, not quite alone. The raven sat–picking at its wings–on the balcony railing. Its blue-white eyes burned hotly in the darkness.

Finn walked over to it and it hopped over to his left hand. He petted the bird carefully. The moment his fingers brushed the bird's feathers, red jewels–like the ones burning in the catacombs–suddenly lit up below them. He gasped as the immensity of the cavern was made clear to him.

Farther than the eye could see, the cavern stretched out before him. There was a set of stone steps that led from his left zig-zagging down to the floor that was five stories below him. And on that floor, there were what appeared at first to be statues. Countless numbers of them all lined up in neat rows from one end of the cavern to the other. At least, he assumed they went that far, because he could not see the far wall. Just row after row of the monstrous statues.

Except they were not statues. They were the Dreadbrood.

Their heads were lowered as if they had fallen asleep on their feet. He knew that their eyes were closed. The one that had woken was somewhere behind him, in the coffin drawers, resting until it was needed again.

What should I do? Finn wondered.

Should he go down those stairs and touch one of the Dreadbrood? He could almost imagine the leathery, dead, cold flesh beneath his fingertips. He was horrified at the idea that Ryleth's skin felt like that. But hers was still warm. The Dreadbrood's would not be. Regardless, he should not go down there. He was not one of them. He was their leader. He was to control them. Being above them was where he ought to be. Definitely above them. So they could all lift their heads and see him.

Should he try to get their attention? But how? Speak to them? Were there some magic words that he should say? If there were they would, undoubtedly, be in ancient Aeturnal and since the modern Fae languages were beyond him, that one surely was. Besides, no words sprung to mind.

He looked at the bird and lifted an eyebrow. It hopped up and down, its head turning this way and that, as it regarded him.

"Don't you have anything to tell me?" he asked.

The bird let out a *caw*! Finn nearly jumped. The noise echoed throughout the cavern. His head snapped towards the still shapes below. But they remained still. None of them had moved a muscle.

"You could give me some instructions here," Finn pointed out.

The bird was suddenly fascinated with the staff. He brought it closer to the winged being. It bit at the staff, trying to get him to lower the gem towards it. He did so. It pecked at the gem.

"Hey! Cut that out! You could damage it," he hissed.

The raven fluffed its feathers and appeared annoyed.

"How do you think I feel? Everyone's counting on me. If I can't command the Dreadbrood then

nothing else can go forward," he confessed. "At least Rohan has my father to train him. I'm just winging it here."

The raven stretched its wings.

"Ha ha, very funny," Finn said as the raven flapped its wings. "You want me to fly? I don't…"

He stopped. He *could* fly actually. He'd done it in the Empire when he'd faced off against the Ostils. He had flown above them, looking down upon them, as he'd brought death and destruction and…

Finn's free hand went up to his hair. It was a movement that he hadn't intended to make. At first, he wasn't even sure why he'd done it or why his stomach twisted when he had. But then he knew.

Accept yourself.

Finn closed his eyes.

If I do this and lose control… Everyone could die, Finn whispered.

Accept yourself, the words repeated.

They'll all know just how different I am when I do this, Finn thought almost helplessly. *Marikoth has white hair. What if Rohan thinks that means I'm like him?*

Accept yourself. Accept yourself. Accept yourself. Accept yourself. Accept–

ALL RIGHT! Finn shouted internally.

He looked over his shoulder at the others. They were all looking at him. Rohan's eyes were fixed on him. Nafi was stamping his feet, likely to get sensation back into them. Artremaya was watchful and waiting. Hugues' lips were pursed. Tearlach lifted an eyebrow. Get on with it, that eyebrow seemed to say. And Tearlach was right.

Tell me that all the good things we want will happen if I do this, Finn insisted.

The raven just looked at him.

Nothing good can happen until I do this. All sorts of bad things will definitely happen if I do not, he realized.

Letting his hair go white was such a vain, small thing and yet he knew that it would mean something. He was giving up the idea that he was human or Fae. He was a creation of the God of Death. Once he did this, there was no pretending to be anything else. Rohan had embraced his Aeturnal side that day, it was time for him to do the same this night.

I love you, Rohan, Finn thought fiercely.

And then he lifted himself up onto the balcony railing. He heard the faint cries of the others in shock as he did this. The raven fluttered up and flew a few feet ahead of him and stayed there at eye level. The winds picked up again and the gemstone in his staff burned blood red.

Finn stepped off the railing. The cries were swept away by the howl of the wind as he was suspended in mid-air. Finn allowed that wind to move him effortlessly to the very center of the cavern. The light from his staff was like a bloody sun in the cavern's "sky."

He could feel every single Dreadbrood beneath him. He could see the single threads within each one of them. They were limp. He reached for them. The threads all lifted as one, all of them being gathered to him. They strained for him. He had them. All of them.

His whole body tingled. He attached those threads to himself. The moment he did so, he felt the *possibility* of them. They were extensions of himself. Every pair of eyes were his. Every set of claws were his. Every weapon, every fang, every foot, tail, snout, all of it, every part of them were his to control. All he needed to do was…

It was so simple.

Finn smiled and sent one simple command to the Dreadbrood, *Wake up.*

And in that moment, when all of their heads snapped upwards and their eyes opened, Finn swore that he felt his hair go white.

THE HAND OF DEATH

Earlier…

The ashy color was spreading across the lengths of Ryleth's forearms. The cracks were widening and black pus was weeping from them. These terrible changes were especially pronounced on her left arm. Ryleth's breathing was labored and her lips were blanched of all color. Thalanil kept a steady stream of healing energy going into her, but all it did was blunt the pain. It did not stop the creep of death at all.

She grasped his right hand with her left. Her skin felt leathery, dry, and her grip was impossibly strong. His own hand ached from it, because she held onto him so tightly. He did not protest. If his magic could do nothing to ease her then he'd give her the simple touch she needed. He would be her anchor in this sea of pain.

The undead in the room watched them out of blank eyes. They rocked back and forth, moaning softly every so often, but there was nothing in them that showed intelligence or feeling. Would Ryleth become like that?

"Christopher, how are you getting on with your potion?" Thalanil strove to keep his voice even and calm.

Christopher was doing all he could. The boy was a whirlwind when he could be but precise when he had to be. Thalanil could not believe that Christopher was only a few years over twenty. No pure-blooded Fae at his age–or even close to it–could be so focused under such difficult circumstances.

Over a dozen alembics were bubbling with different concoctions. Each was a different color, from a tawny amber to a brilliant purple. The smells coming off of them were disgustingly noxious. But that was the case with potions often. Christopher seemed not to be affected by the noxious smells or the heat of his equipment.

"One more minute and then I can combine them," Christopher said coolly. "How is our patient?"

Christopher looked over at Ryleth and his expression tightened. Almost the entirety of her left forearm was changed. The right was almost as bad. A black line was trailing up her arms aiming towards her chest and perhaps her heart. Once it got there… Thalanil would not allow himself to speculate what would happen then.

"I know you're doing the best you can, Christopher," Ryleth got out through trembling lips. "But if there's any way to make it sooner… ah!"

Ryleth curled over and shook. Her eyes were squeezed tight. Her grip on his hand was nearly bone-breaking. He grimaced and said nothing.

"If I prepare it inappropriately then it won't work at all and getting it to you sooner will not end your pain or stop the change," Christopher answered. Then grimacing again, Christopher added, "I'm

sorry. I am going as fast as the process will allow."

"I know," Ryleth breathed out. "I was just hopeful."

"I will fix you," Christopher said, but he aimed the words towards his alembics and not her.

"Lucky that you are here and studying this," she admitted.

"I wish I was farther along," he answered and went back to crushing seeds and tending to the alembics.

"I could put you to sleep, Ryleth," Thalanil offered again. "You would not be conscious of the pain then."

"I know, but as I said before, then I might not be conscious for the last few moments of my life," she said with a faint laugh. "Our immortality misleads us, doesn't it, my king? We have all the time in the world until we do not."

"It does."

"Better that we act as humans do and cherish every moment instead of thinking we have endless moments ahead of us so why care now?" she asked rhetorically.

"Indeed. It is a foolish vice of ours," Thalanil agreed even as his heart clenched. "But you will get to live your immortal life with that intensity after this, Ryleth. You are not dying today."

"Am I not? My mind tells me otherwise," she answered.

Thalanil swallowed the bitter lump in his throat. Could he do nothing for her? Watching her fade away like this was unconscionable!

"What is your mind telling you?" Christopher asked.

"Her mind is lying to her," Thalanil insisted.

"Yes, but even lies are valuable," Christopher countered.

"Ah, I feel… I see a tunnel actually," Ryleth said and her feverish eyes looked ahead of her as if she were actually seeing it. "I hear wings. Birds, I think. But large. Very large."

"The God of Death," Thalanil murmured almost against his will. "It takes the form of a raven when it appears to Finrael."

"Yes," Ryleth gasped. "Ravenspars and Death. It was so obvious." She let out a pained laugh. "Forgive me, my king, I don't know what I am saying. You are not death. You and Finrael are the essence of life."

"No, Ryleth, you are right. The Ravenspars have always had a connection to death, even if we did not know it," he said. "It was there for all to see. But we would not."

"I'm sorry that I am keeping you from Finrael. I can only imagine how hard this is for him," Ryleth said with heavy gasps.

"My son is strong. He does not need me to hold his hand in this," Thalanil said, even as he spoke around a lump in his throat. His son was facing an impossible challenge and he was not there. As he had not been there for so many of the hardships that Finrael had experienced in his short life. "He asked me to stay with you and I must honor that."

"Another thing about Ravenspars is that they would gnaw their own limbs off before admitting that they need help," Ryleth said. "What Prince Finrael is being asked to become is… so hard. No matter how strong he is. "

Cold sweat dotted her brow. She rocked as she spoke. The ashy grayness expanded another few millimeters. Thalanil bit back a cry of frustration as he desperately kept his magic flowing into her.

"He is not the only strong one. Hold on, Ryleth," Thalanil said.

There was a sound by the door. It was the servant, Thomas, who Ryleth had sacrificed herself for. He was carrying a tray with soothing tea and hot towels. His expression became wretched when he

saw the state of Ryleth's arms.

"It's gotten worse!" he burst out. "Why hasn't it stopped? I got her out of the coffin–"

"The process does not work that way evidently," Christopher told him. "Deposit your tray and leave."

"I…" Thomas swallowed convulsively. "I don't want to leave."

Christopher snapped, "You are in the way–"

"Thomas, set that down and get a chair. Bring it over here so you can sit beside Ryleth," Thalanil suggested gently. "That won't distract you, will it, Christopher?"

"So long as he's quiet and doesn't bang on about tea or some such stupidity," Christopher spoke to his alembics again.

Thomas did as Thalanil asked. He reached out for Ryleth's right hand. Her eyes widened slightly, but then she gave it to him.

"Is she going to be okay?" Thomas asked.

"She–"

"It doesn't matter, Thomas," Ryleth interrupted Thalanil. She swallowed deeply. "Regardless if I am or not, it's not your fault. I chose to go after you."

He lowered his head. "If I hadn't–"

"But you did and we cannot undo the past," Ryleth breathed. "I've been thinking so long and hard about how you were treated by me and the others. How we treated all the humans in our care and I am ashamed."

"We made deals. We got what we bargained for," Thomas breathed.

"It doesn't matter. Even if what you asked for was wrong," Ryleth got out. "All we did was to prey on vulnerability. That is worse than anything requested. And we acted morally superior while doing it."

Thalanil shifted at her words. He had never kept human slaves himself. But he had never condemned the practice. He had actually thought them lucky to be in the Empire. He had thought so many things that he now saw were foolish and ignorant at best, but wildly wrong and harmful in reality.

Why had he allowed slavery to continue? Why had he allowed people to treat Maeve and their son as lesser? Why had he not spoken out about it all? He had been king. He'd had a chance to change things for the better. But all he'd done was cling onto power and how things had always been.

Rohan and Finrael will not lead that way. They will not allow wrongs to go on unaddressed. They will change the world.

"So what I'm trying to say, Thomas, is that I'm *sorry*," Ryleth continued.

"No, no! Don't say that! I'm not worth it!" Thomas shook his head almost violently. "You–you don't know all that I've done!"

"I have some idea," she said dryly. "But for the part I played in your life, I'm sorry and I wish I had more time to change our future."

"I don't want you to be sorry!" Thomas drew in deep gulps. "I want you to live! Ryleth, I want you to live!"

"And what I want for you, Thomas, if for you to stop listening to the voice in your head that tells you to do bad, foolish things," Ryleth said. "You're intelligent. You're quick. You're strong. You have a chance to make a difference in this world. A *good* difference. But only if you stop following that voice."

Thomas looked stricken. "I'm all those instincts, Ryleth. You have no idea…"

"You have a chance to choose to be something else," Thalanil found himself saying. "Trust me when I tell you that change is hard, but it is *good*. Like you, I have been many things I am ashamed of now, made decisions that were bad ones, and now… now choosing to be different is priceless. You can choose, Thomas."

Thomas hung his head. "You need to live, Ryleth. If nothing else, to make sure I choose differently."

"I want to be there, Thomas. You have no idea how much," she said and then let out a cry as the grayness spread again. That black line going towards her heart darkened and spread beneath her robes. How close was it? What would happen when it touched her heart?

"Christopher!" Thalanil called over to the young man who was straining liquids into a beaker. "Please tell me it's ready!"

"It is… DONE!" Christopher cried.

The young man carefully lifted the beaker that contained the fully-black liquid. Colors swirled within its depths before disappearing into the blackness. It was like midnight liquified. Christopher brought the beaker to Ryleth. She could barely lift her head.

"I just want you to know that I have not yet tested this, Ryleth," Christopher began, "so I can offer no guarantees that it will heal you or that it won't… well, that it won't kill you."

A smile crossed her suffering face. "It's the choice of certain death versus possible death. I know which one I choose."

She reached for the beaker, but her hands were shaking too badly. Thalanil took the beaker for her.

"Thomas, help Ryleth open her mouth and tilt her head back," Thalanil instructed.

Thomas did as he said. Ryleth's eyelids were fluttering. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. He tipped the beaker so that the black liquid filled her mouth. She swallowed it all down, not even gagging at what likely was a horrible taste. He took the beaker away. Ryleth swallowed the last of it. Thomas released her chin and her head hung on her neck like a broken flower stem.

For a long time, nothing happened.

Thalanil realized he was holding his breath. Thomas looked like he might explode. Christopher was as still as stone. His expression was unreadable. Did he think he succeeded or failed? Which had he done?

Ryleth's head snapped back and she was staring up at the ceiling as if seeing something up there that none of them could see. Yet, for a moment, it seemed as if every light dimmed and a chill wind passed through the castle. When he saw Thomas shiver and glance nervously at the door, he knew he had not imagined it.

Ryleth's mouth opened and she appeared to be speaking, but Thalanil could not hear the words. For a moment, her eyes looked to have rolled back into her head. She rose up from the chair. Her arms lifted from her sides and *reached* towards the ceiling as if to capture something incredibly precious and important.

"He has come," she said, her voice reverberating and strange. "Death's Chosen has come!"

And then she collapsed into the chair. Her legs kicked out and her heels beat a tattoo against the floor. Her arms flailed as if she were having a fit. Foam ran out of her mouth in a river. Her eyelids were closed. She danced on her chair. He held her there so that she didn't hurt herself.

Then she went still.

So still.

"Is she–is she dead?" Thomas asked, his voice crawling up an octave.

"I don't know," Thalanil whispered.

Christopher said nothing but he moved in and checked her pulse. "She is… ah! Her heart is still beating!"

Ryleth's eyelids fluttered open. Her red eyes focused in on them and she gave them all a quizzical look as if she couldn't quite figure out where she was or why they were there. Then knowledge flooded in.

"I'm alive," she breathed and sat up.

She held out her arms in front of her. The ashy grayness started to retreat, her skin returning to its healthy dark color. She let out a laugh and a sigh.

"Oh, by the gods, you did it, Christopher! You did it!" She beamed at the young man.

Christopher allowed one rare smile to cross his lips. "I really should take blood and tissue samples to know if–"

"Maybe later." Ryleth looked both alarmed and amused as she held her arms tightly to her in case he started taking those samples now.

Thalanil got up and put a hand on Christopher's shoulder. "I have never known anyone so clever as you, Christopher."

"Among humans, perhaps not," Christopher acquiesced. "Of course, compared to the Fae–"

"I have not known *anyone*–human or Fae–so gifted," Thalanil clarified, which had Christopher's eyes widening and then his head lowering.

"I–I–I… that is quite the compliment," Christopher whispered.

"When this is all over, I must insist that you go to one of the magical universities. The best instructors on all alchemical theories will be at your disposal," Thalanil assured him.

"Absolutely," Ryleth nodded vigorously. "Such talent cannot go to waste."

Christopher's eyes gleamed. "I should like that. Very much."

Christopher going to one of the Fae schools would cause an uproar, but it was time for such an uproar to happen. Someone of his skills should not be denied access to knowledge because he was human. In his brief life, Christopher would move the science of alchemy forward faster and further than any immortal could. And Thalanil would see that happen. Not just for Christopher either. Things were going to change.

* * *

THOMAS ACTUALLY FELT like he was walking on air as he drifted up the stairs to Thalanil's rooms. He'd offered to get wraps for the Fae king and the others because the basement of the castle had gotten so cold. They had insisted on remaining below–even Ryleth–as they wanted to find out what had happened with Finn and the others.

"Miles is sure to be up there. I'm certain that he will be happy to help you bring them down," Thalanil had said.

Thomas had been happy to have a task. Now that Ryleth was going to live and his mistakes had not ended in disaster like they usually did, he was intent on making one of those changes for the better. Helping others eagerly and without distaste was high on his list. Besides, he could grab a wrap of his own. Maybe the king would let him keep one of his fancy fur-lined ones. Ah, that would be a step up for him!

Thalanil's rooms were on the same floor as the king's. He took the nearest staircase from the basement that led him up to the floor right outside of the king's chambers. He was so used to seeing

the guards outside there that, at first, he hardly paid attention to them. But then he remembered that others liked to be acknowledged. And they were all fellow workers at the castle! So Thomas called out a merry greeting.

The guards said nothing back.

Miffed that they were not acting like fellow workers, he shot them a nasty look. He hoped that didn't undo his act of kindness. But really if they were going to be rude then they deserved it!

Except they weren't being rude. They were slumped forward–still standing–but almost as if they were pinned to the wall and their legs weren't holding them up at all. Shocked and not a little afraid, Thomas considered crying out and getting someone else up here to take care of this. Wasn't running into things headlong his problem?

But what if they were ill? What if he delayed and they died? If he hadn't gone and gotten Ryleth when he had, she would have died! He would check if they were all right and *then* call out for help! Yes, that sounded logical.

"Are you all right? Can you hear me?" Thomas asked as he approached the guards. "Are you injured?"

The guards did not respond. Was that blood that he saw trickling out of the corner of one of their mouths? What was going on here? Were they dead? Were they…

It was then that he saw the door to the king's chambers was ajar and there was a flickering white light showing beyond it. He thought he heard someone talking. Their voice was high and light like a child's. What would a child be doing in the king's bedchambers when he wasn't there? The servants were of all ages, but not children. The flickering stopped and there was silence. All Thomas heard in his ears was his own breathing and heartbeat.

The door swung open.

"Hannah?! Thomas asked, his voice reflecting his uncertainty as he stared into the eyes of the servant girl who worked in the kitchens. She'd been taken in after some tragedy had hit her family. Something about a glowing man and….

Hannah's eyes were red. Red as crimson fire. Red as the blood that was spilling down his chest from the wound she'd made in his throat. He gurgled something like no or stop or not yet! This couldn't be happening! He'd just sworn to turn over a new leaf! He'd been about to change! Make a good start to his life!

But then he was crumpling to the ground as his life's blood ran out of him. Hannah–or whatever was masquerading as a child–stepped over his form, avoiding the blood to keep it from staining her pretty shoes. Her hair swinging from side to side as she skipped down the stairs was the last thing Thomas ever saw.

CATCHING A KILLER

Rohan kneeled down by Thomas' body while Leonid checked the two Guards. Rohan had no love for Thomas, but Ryleth had told him he'd handled himself well in rescuing her from the Dreadbrood. In fact, upon learning of his death from the frantic Guards as they were leaving the catacombs, genuine grief had rocked her for some time.

"He was going to start again," Ryleth had said, her voice slightly hoarse. "He didn't get that chance. Who would do this?"

Why would he be killed? The Guards were dead as well, but likely before Thomas based upon the tackiness of their blood. Had Thomas come upon the Guards' killer? But, if so, why had the killer taken so long before killing him?

"They were nailed to the wall with skewers that are used in the kitchens. Right through their throats," Leonid's voice sounded tight.

"Thomas' throat was cut," Rohan said as he carefully looked over the still form in the pool of blood. He closed Thomas' open, staring eyes.

"Damn this! Damn this all!" Leonid had faced death many times at Rohan's side and on his own, but to have his people killed *in* the castle, right outside of the king's chambers was not something that anyone had anticipated. "To anyone just passing by, they might have seemed alive."

"Thomas must have taken a closer look," Serxio said, his right hand fluttering by his own throat. "And perhaps that was what got him killed."

"Thalanil said he had sent him for wraps as the catacombs had become chilly," Rohan said dully. "So he must have just been passing by and noticed something off."

"If only he had reported his suspicions to someone rather than investigating himself he might still be alive to live that new life," Serxio murmured as he leaned heavily against the wall. He must have realized he was too near the bloody marks on the wall from where one of the Guards had been nailed and he quickly twitched away from it.

"They were trying to get to you and Finn, your majesty! They must have thought that you both were inside!" Leonid gritted out. He rose and looked ready to fight an army. "With all these strangers in our midst, it could be anyone!"

Rohan wondered if the killer was one of the new arrivals. Nafi's people or Artremaya's. Yet they'd never figured out who had poisoned Tearlach and his warriors when someone had pretended to be the Achuvien king to let the undead inside the castle. Rohan had assumed it was Marikoth himself behind it. But perhaps he'd been too hasty assuming that there was no one else in it with the Death Mage.

"I do not believe that Rohan and I were being targeted, Leonid," Finn said quietly. "All of the

monarchs' people would have known we were at the dinner, even if they did not know we went into the catacombs. Coming now to Rohan's chambers would be the least likely time to discover us there."

Rohan glanced up at his beloved who stood beside him, arms crossed over his chest. Finn's hair was completely white. But unlike Marikoth, he seemed healthier than before even with this change. Where Finn's uncle had looked like a death's head with his hair white, it looked *natural* on Finn. There was high color in Finn's cheeks and an almost additional plumpness around his mouth.

"But the king keeps little of value in his rooms," Serxio pointed out. "The crowns and jewels are kept in the vault. His clothing…" Here Serxio sniffed and added, "is not worth much. Certainly not worth enough to risk going up against two Guards."

"There is one thing in there of great value," Finn said quietly. "They came to use the Luminus."

Rohan closed his eyes as he realized what Finn was saying must be true. It all made sense, even the decision to kill the Guards, because there was something of desperate value to tell Marikoth about.

"But why would they want the Luminus? Ack! Of course, to communicate with Marikoth, the bastard!" Leonid growled, following his unspoken train of thought.

"Yes, to tell him that I've located the Dreadbrood," Finn said. His beloved tightened his arms around himself.

"That *would* be of great value for him to know!" Serxio blinked rapidly. "Oh, good grief! Who is the traitor? I can think of no one who would betray us like this for Marikoth!"

"Can't you?" Leonid looked grim. "Marikoth came and poured poison into Lord De Clare's ear in the past. We know he reached out to Tearlach, playing his court magician for a time. What's to say he hasn't gone to Bolan and Sultane and made them honeyed offers? And we only have Tearlach and Hugues' word that they aren't with him anymore."

"Hugues and Tearlach were with Finn and Rohan in the Dreadbrood chamber when this happened," Serxio pointed out. "Though they could have enlisted a servant to do this, but that seems awfully risky. They'd have to know how to use the Luminus and kill Guards efficiently and–"

"Knowledge that Finn has the Dreadbrood was worth those risks," Rohan said, even as his soul curdled at the thought of *either* Hugues or Tearlach betraying them.

"It's neither of them," Finn said with definitiveness. "Even if they were inclined to betray us, there's no benefit to them. They both realize that with the Dreadbrood, I am nigh unstoppable."

"You're right. Hugues' greatest fear was what you could do with them," Rohan agreed.

"Yes, it was, but I think he is more excited about what having the Dreadbrood will do for Rirea rather than being afraid of me," Finn pointed out. "Right now, with things as they are, Hugues gets everything he's always wanted. Your family ruling the entirety of the Empire." Finn turned cool eyes upon Rohan. "And I would imagine that you would need a new *regent* for Rirea."

"You're thinking Hugues would take that role?" Rohan blinked.

Finn nodded. "It would make sense. He is the only other person of your bloodline living that we know of. Simply put, you can offer him everything if he stays loyal to you while Marikoth has already proven himself unreliable at best. So no, Hugues is not behind this. And Tearlach is not either."

"Tearlach would stab me in the chest, not in the back," Rohan agreed.

"Yes, his nature is to be direct though he is quite skilled at spycraft, but that is not why I am certain," Finn said.

"He's the reincarnation of the Necromancer," Rohan added.

"Yes, that too, but…" Here Finn bit his lower lip. "I rather made a promise to him, which I should have waited to speak to you about."

"Oh?" Rohan could not imagine what it was.

"After this is all over with Marikoth, he has agreed to house the Dreadbrood back in Achuvia," Finn admitted with a downcast head.

"That is generous of him," Rohan said carefully. "He knows the effect it has on the land though–"

"Yes, but Achuvia has not flourished since the Dreadbrood has been in Rirea. Quite the opposite," Finn explained. "He will house the Dreadbrood in exchange for us feeding his people."

"And that's what you agreed to?" Rohan asked.

Finn ducked his head. "Ah, *yes*, I realize we should have discussed it–"

"Perhaps we should have, but it is a brilliant solution to everyone's problems. I am pleased beyond measure, Finn," Rohan assured his beloved.

Finn's smile was as bright as the sun. "I'm so glad. I wanted to take care of the Achuviens in any case. Knowing the deprivation that Rirea has faced, if we could stop that suffering somewhere else, it seemed the right thing to do."

"And you've made a damn well powerful ally too!" Leonid grinned. "With those devil Achuviens at our back and the Dreadbrood at our beck and call, there's none that can assail us with any ease!"

"That's very true," Rohan nodded.

Finn smiled again. "I am glad it is a good decision. Tearlach chastised me for being so generous to him without speaking to you, but–"

"He's taking the Dreadbrood. That speaks of a generosity that no one could ever expect," Rohan disagreed.

"I know. He said that Achuvia and the Dreadbrood belong to the God of Death so… but yes, it is not something we could ever ask of anyone. So to have it offered was very unexpected," Finn said. "And not something I thought we could wait on."

"No, indeed not," Rohan agreed. Then with a mischievous smile. "I think Tearlach is more in love with you, Finn, than with me these days."

"Oh, you are his first love, Rohan." Finn quirked a smile at him. "Always and forever."

"So it has to be someone from Artremaya or Nafi's retinue then?" Leonid asked. "I see that they made themselves scarce after seeing the Dreadbrood. Nafi looked like he might faint by the time he walked out of there and Artremaya looked disturbed as all get out."

"Hugues is with Nafi now, I believe, to argue our case," Rohan said. "Artremaya asked for time alone to consider what she saw. And what we said about the restored Empire."

"Having an army of the undead in the basement could cause anyone to rethink their beliefs!" Serxio agreed.

"It was quite the display." Rohan glanced over at Finn again.

He wondered how Finn was doing. After the young man had literally stepped off of the balcony and not plummeted to his death, Finn had woken the Dreadbrood with almost ease. Not almost. With complete *ease*.

Finn had spun slowly above the army of the dead as all their eyes had gazed up at him in wonder and devotion. Magic had been so heavy in the air that Rohan had been able to taste it on his tongue.

Finn had then floated back to the balcony. The wind had died down and they had been able to come to the balcony's edge. Levitating there, hair white as bone, arms spread to his sides, Finn had smiled upon the party. His eyes had gone from green to black. He looked like a king of old.

Or a god awakened from a long slumber.

"Gaze upon the most powerful army in the world," Finn had intoned. "Cut their limbs off, set them on fire, freeze them, strike them with electricity, and they will still fight as if you had done nothing to

them."

Artremaya's eyes had widened and she'd placed one trembling hand against her chest as she'd looked from Finn to the Dreadbrood down below. The creatures gazed at Finn wherever he was, moving almost as if they were one organism.

"Marikoth does not stand a chance," Hugues whispered and appeared thoughtful.

Nafi's dark eyes darted everywhere. "What do you intend to do with this great, unstoppable army *after* you defeat Marikoth?"

Finn stared at Nafi for long silent moments with those black eyes. "I will use it to defend the restored Empire against any enemies foreign or domestic."

"*Restored* Empire?" Artremaya asked sharply.

"Killing Marikoth and bringing down the Wall for good will not restore health to our lands," Rohan explained as he rested his hands on the balcony railing. He longed to touch Finn, but his beloved floated too far from him. "The Empire must be brought under the leadership of the Heir to House Aeturnal and Death's Chosen. That is the only way the overabundance of life in the current Empire can be shared with the rest of the Empire."

"So you and–and *him* are going to rule us all?" Nafi snapped, gesturing wildly toward Finn.

"Old friend, I am betting you already guessed some of this before you came here," Hugues tempered slightly.

"Don't you old friend me, Hugues!" Nafi shook his finger at Rohan's uncle. "This was a bait and switch, you having us come here like this!"

"Not an intentional one," Hugues assured him.

Artremaya turned to Rohan. "Do you expect that Nafi and I will step down from our reigns and hand over all power to the two of you?"

"No," Rohan answered, which had Nafi gawking for a moment. "I would have you and Nafi continue to wisely lead your kingdoms, but as vassal states under the greater umbrella of the Empire."

"Even asking us to be vassal states is a great ask," Artremaya said. "The people of Sultane are proud of their independence and spirit. You would ask them to bend the knee?"

"I would ask them to see that being a part of a greater whole is better for all, including the independent people of Sultane," Rohan answered.

"And it is something that the original treaty that your ancestors signed already agreed to," Hugues pointed out.

"It speaks only of the kingdoms coming together in the case of an emergency! Not to cease being independent," Nafi pointed out.

"Ah, yes, I see that you *did* review the treaty before coming, Nafi," Hugues chuckled. "The people who originally drafted the treaty knew that there would come a time when the entirety of the old Empire would fall into ruin unless it was reunited. The power stone network that Rohan has told you about lasted many millennia without upkeep, but those days are done. What is happening in Rirea will sweep into your lands too, unless the old Empire is restored under Aeturnal leadership."

"And if we do not agree to become vassal states you will send this army of yours after us?" Nafi pointed a shaking finger at Finn and the Dreadbrood.

Rohan was surprised at how, now that he was faced with intransigence, he was no longer uncertain of his response. Crossing his hands at the wrists behind his back he looked at both monarchs coolly.

"While I hope it does not come to that, know that I will not let my people suffer because of your individual desires to lead," Rohan told them. "There is no *your* people and *mine*. There is only *ours*.

And I will protect them even from *you*."

He looked up at Finn then. His beloved had a small smile on his lips. Finn was in agreement.

"I believe he means that," Tearlach chuckled. "I would not push them on this issue if I were you."

"It is not *your* kingdom he seeks to take!" Nafi snapped, still quivering with indignation.

"We are family. My kingdom. Their kingdom. They are but lines on a map. Family trumps all," Tearlach answered easily.

Of course, the two other monarchs had not been ready to agree that "lines on a map" didn't matter. Rohan was not sure what they would do. He had been in discussion with Leonid and Serxio about watching their people closely when they'd been informed of Thomas and the Guards' deaths.

Finn's voice brought him back to the present as he said, "Regardless of who told Marikoth, now that he knows about the Dreadbrood, we cannot delay going up against him. I had hoped for him to be completely unprepared, but now… now he will have his army arrayed."

Rohan grimaced. "I should have moved the Luminus somewhere else."

"In a way, it is good you did not," Finn said. "Now we know that Marikoth is aware of what's happening here and that there is a traitor in our midst."

"When you say we cannot delay going against that rat bastard, what time frame are you thinking of, Finn?" Leonid asked.

"Tomorrow," Finn answered with a heavy sigh. "I would say tonight, but both Rohan and I need to prepare."

"Tomorrow." Rohan closed his eyes. "I know that you wanted more time to practice controlling the Dreadbrood–"

"There's really no need for that," Finn cut him off, but gently. "I have control of them. They are like my limbs. They are extensions of me."

"We need to inform everyone, including Nafi and Artremaya. We need to tell them there's a killer on the loose in any case," Rohan said. As he was about to get up from the ground, his thumb brushed the edge of the pool of blood. He grimaced as the cooling liquid stained his skin. "If only we knew who did this. I would not have a traitor breathing the same air as us."

"Here, your majesty, a tissue to clean that off," Serxio offered hastily.

"Wait… no…" Rohan froze as the blood on his thumb suddenly formed a perfect drop.

The blood *quivered*. It reminded him of a dog eager to go on the hunt.

"Rohan, what's going on?" Finn asked. "I taste *magic* in the air!"

There was definitely the bitter tang of ozone suddenly hanging about them. Rohan stared at the blood drop and then at the pool. It was a crazy idea. But wasn't magic all about will? These murders happened in *his* castle, a castle built by the Aeturnals, so that every stone was connected to him, and every person inside of it too. He placed his hand into the blood pool, fingers splayed.

"Who killed them?" Rohan intoned. "Show me."

His voice took on the timbor and tenor it had when he had pronounced himself the Heir of House Aeturnal against the spiders. A tremor went through the blood. It started to stream towards the stairs.

"Good gods! What's it doing?" Serxio cried out.

"Finding our killer!" Leonid unsheathed his sword.

"Exactly, Leonid! Come, it will take us to the guilty party. I would have *words* with them," Rohan said.

All four of them clattered down the stairs after the blood that moved in a thin line down each step like a waterfall flowing from stone to stone. They encountered Thalanil and Miles coming up the stairs. Miles was twittering concernedly about the Fae king exposing himself to such cold in the

catacombs for all that time and why had he not sent for a wrap earlier? Miles would have brought him anything he needed!

"Blood! Be careful, your majesty!" Miles squeaked as he pulled Thalanil out of the red stream's way.

Not that it was necessary, the blood was already running around the Fae king. There was not a drop of it left on the hand that he'd placed into the pool so he doubted it would stain the Fae king's boots.

"What magic is this, Rohan?" Thalanil asked.

"It's to find a killer," Rohan said. "I commanded it to find that person and it is leading us there."

Thalanil lifted an eyebrow. "You are truly coming into your own to have performed such a spell innately."

"Magic is desire made real," Rohan said.

"Well said. I would accompany you to see how this turns out and who the traitor is," Thalanil said.

Thalanil then put an arm around Finn's shoulders as all of them rushed down the stairs. Out of the corner of his eye, Rohan saw Thalanil murmur loving words into Finn's ear. Thalanil had not yet had time to speak to his son since the discovery of the Dreadbrood. He was clearly making sure Finn knew that he saw no difference in his beloved son. Miles kept hold of the train of the fur wrap around Thalanil's shoulders to make sure it didn't drag on the ground.

Pleased that Finn was being taken care of, Rohan took the lead. He would *not* allow a killer to be in his home! He would not allow his people to be harmed and do nothing! No one had the right to do what Marikoth had done.

"The kitchens," Serxio said in confusion. "The killer came through here?"

"The skewers," Leonid muttered darkly.

They entered the kitchen to find Cook Shelton working with several other servants to make trays of the dinner they had *not* eaten earlier to go to various chambers within the castle. She wiped her hands on her apron as she bobbed a curtsey at Rohan.

"Your majesty, are you hungry? I was just going to have Ingrid come find you–ack! What is that? Blood?!" Cook Shelton nearly crawled up on a counter to get away from the blood.

"Be not alarmed, Cook Shelton!" Serxio assured her. "This is going to find a killer for us. The blood won't stay here!"

"It's going to what now?" She looked more horrified than before.

But they couldn't stay and explain as the blood streamed right towards the door that led down to the cellar where they'd found the undead. Rohan opened the door and the blood surged down the steps. Thalanil caused some will-o-wisps to bloom and shoot down the stairs.

The cellar had been cleaned up, but there was no food being stored there currently. Most of the shelving had been destroyed, but there were a few boxes that were lined up against the walls. It was to a gap between two boxes that the blood sped and then pooled. The space was hardly large enough for a child to be in…

"Hannah!" Rohan gasped.

The young girl was squished between the two boxes. Her eyes were huge. She was white as chalk and tear tracks were running down her cheeks. In her hands was clutched a dagger. Blood coated the blade.

POSSESSION

Finn stared down at the little girl who cowered before them for a moment. But then realizing it was them–her friends and protectors–Hannah's tear-stained face burst into a desperate smile.

"King Rohan! Finn! Leonid! Serxio!" She called out all of their names as if they were talismans. "What are you doing down here?"

He couldn't believe that Hannah had killed Thomas and the Guards. He felt no evil in her. She might be the best actress in the world, but she couldn't mimic this distress.

Finn got down on his haunches before her. "The question is, what are *you* doing down here, Hannah?"

Her little balled hands were covered in drying blood. The dagger moved from hand to hand as if she couldn't quite figure out how to hold it, but couldn't set it down either.

"I don't… I don't know!" Big, fat tears squeezed out of her eyes and rolled down her cheeks where they gathered under her chin only to spatter on the ground.

"Finn, perhaps not so close." Rohan's hand fell on his shoulder.

He glanced up at Rohan. The Rirean king's expression was unreadable. Beside Rohan, Serxio kept looking between his king and Hannah. His hands rubbed together anxiously. Leonid still had his sword unsheathed but he held it limply in one hand. Clearly, Hannah wasn't the enemy he thought he was going to slay that night. His father and Miles were still by the stairs, observing them, but staying out of the way.

Rohan tried to tug Finn away. Did he think that Hannah was a killer? If she'd done this thing, Finn couldn't believe it was under her own will.

"Rohan, let me speak to her," Finn began.

Rohan tugged him again. "In a moment. Just… come over here."

Finn frowned but got up from his haunches. He allowed Rohan to move him out of Hannah's earshot.

"Rohan, you cannot believe that Hannah killed those people!" Finn whispered fiercely.

"She's covered in their blood, Finn. And I do not believe my magic lies," Rohan said with an anguished glance down at the ground.

The blood formed a half circle around Hannah's feet, but did not go further. Finn stared at it. It had led them unerringly to the little girl. Perhaps though it had been drawn to the dagger. Yet her hands were caked with blood and there were droplets all over her dress. The dress she'd always seemed so proud of. Yet even as he tried to imagine this slender whip of a girl taking down three men–two of them armed–he just couldn't do it. If she'd had magic that would be one thing, but she

didn't.

"Rohan, I understand what you are saying, but she's a *child*. And unless she's been training as an assassin all her life, I cannot see how she could take out three grown men, two of whom have been trained in combat for years," Finn insisted.

Rohan rubbed his weary-looking face with one hand. "I know, but did I ever tell you how we found Hannah? Her history?"

"You did a bit. Serxio and Leonid filled in the rest. She escaped from Marikoth even when her brother didn't," Finn said.

"But did she?" Rohan was staring at him hard. "Did she escape?"

"I…"

"As much as you cannot believe she took down three grown men, I am beginning to wonder how she got away from your uncle. How likely is it that he'd let her flee and tell others of what she saw him doing?" Rohan asked. "It was because of her that we found his nest in the woods and took the spell book from him that Christopher has used so well. I thought it was luck or fate or something. But what if we were simply set up?"

"You think he did something to her?" Finn guessed.

"I think he knows our weaknesses as well as our strengths. He knew we would never hurt a child nor would we let her starve on the streets," Rohan said miserably. "I'm known for bringing in the impoverished to work for me. And a girl like Hannah with a past like hers… There was little doubt what I would do after I spoke to her. To have a spy within our very home that no one would suspect is exactly what Marikoth would set up."

"Even if he did do something to her and sent her here to–to commit treachery, it's still not her fault!" Finn pointed out.

"I know and that is the worst of it. We do not know what he has done to her. We do not know if it can be undone. We do not even know if a cell could hold her. And in the meantime, she is dangerous to everyone else," Rohan pointed out. "She killed three people and who knows what else."

The thought of Hannah in a cell had Finn's blood running cold. He knew it was haunting his beloved as well for Rohan looked as if he would rather peel his own skin off than imprison this child. But Rohan had a point. Even if Hannah was spelled or something, they could not let her wander free in case whatever had been done to her was triggered again. Yet putting her in the dungeon? Even if they were to give her a cell of her own it was beyond imagining.

That is just like Marikoth. He would poison the innocent. He would use our morality against us. Make it a weakness.

"I do not think this is Death Magic. I feel nothing within her that would indicate that," Finn said. "So it must be–be *normal* magic. And we have one of the greatest mages here with us."

He gestured to his father.

Rohan's eyes widened and he murmured, "Of course, Thalanil will know what to do. I hope."

Thalanil moved through the crowd to the front at Finn's invitation. Miles followed closely after him, managing his cloak. Finn gave Miles a gentle smile. His stepbrother beamed as he fussed with the cloak. Miles had never looked happier than he did taking care of the Fae king. Finn hoped that his father would keep his stepbrother on as an attendant or something. They seemed to get on well.

And a human attendant to a Ravenspar will be a step forward in human and Fae relations.

"Finrael, is that the murderer?" his father asked as he took in the small child with disbelief.

"If she is, she can't have done it intentionally. We fear Marikoth may have made her his puppet in some way," Finn said softly.

Rohan added hopefully, “Can you tell? Do you know magic of that kind? Do you know how to undo it?”

“Compulsion or, more likely, possession of some sort could accomplish such a thing,” Thalanil murmured as he stroked his chin. “I am not a master of such things. They are dark arts that never appealed to me.”

“But Marikoth definitely would study them,” Rohan muttered.

“Yes, he would,” Thalanil agreed. “I must examine her to fully understand what has been done to her.”

“Perhaps if I ask her questions while you watch her that would do?” Finn asked.

His father nodded. The two of them moved towards the little girl while Rohan and Miles hung back. Neither looked happy about it.

“I’ll stay close by your sides, your majesties,” Leonid offered.

“Yes, we… we don’t want anything to happen,” Serxio muttered.

“We can handle it if anything does,” Finn said kindly. “Be with Rohan and Miles. My father and I can take this from here.”

Both men looked relieved and anguished at the same time. Finn patted their shoulders and urged them away. Then he made the final approach to Hannah. Upon seeing Thalanil, Hannah gasped and drew her knees up even tighter against her chest. She must have seen the similarity in his father and Marikoth’s features.

Or she’s one of Marikoth’s followers and realizes the danger he poses. But I’m the greatest danger of all. Except I cannot imagine hurting Hannah.

She gasped, “Is that–”

“This is my father, Hannah, not the Glowing Man,” Finn said gently as he hunkered down in front of her again.

She gulped and reached for Finn. Her bloody fingers curled around his hand convulsively. Yet the more she looked at Thalanil, the more she relaxed her grip.

“Oh, oh. He has black hair while the Glowing Man’s is white,” she said in a small voice. It was then that she seemed to notice that his hair was all white now, too. She reached up to touch. “Your hair, Finn!”

He caught her hand. “It’s okay, Hannah. It’s supposed to be this color. Doesn’t it look nice?”

He had accepted it and what he was in the chamber down below. He no longer felt at all conflicted. But he knew that this color–not to mention who and what he was–would scare some people, especially those who were familiar with his uncle.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, you’re handsome.”

“Thank you, Hannah,” he said genuinely. “My father and I just want to talk to you. Are you okay with that?”

She nodded.

“All right, what is the last thing you remember doing before you came down here?” Finn asked.

“I was in the kitchen with Cook Shelton, but then I started feeling funny. Cold and tingly,” she said and her shoulders twitched at the memory of it.

“And after that?” Finn asked. “Where did you go after the kitchen?”

Two more tears formed in her big eyes. “I don’t… don’t remember!”

“But you went somewhere, yes? Your dress is… dirty and you have that dagger,” Finn pointed out.

She looked at the dagger with mixed emotions. Loathing and desire. It was such a wrong look for a child.

"I just remember being in the kitchen and then–then I was down here. In the dark." The last was said so softly. "But I felt like I wasn't alone. That the Glowing Man was near so I hid."

"Have you seen Marikoth in the castle?" Finn asked.

A troubled expression crossed her face. "I–I thought I might have."

"The day the undead invaded the castle?" Finn asked.

She nodded. "And after, but…" Her face scrunched up. "In the mirror? Or a ball? I don't know. It was like a dream. A bad dream!"

She was starting to hyperventilate. Finn looked up at his father for guidance. He didn't want to ask her more questions that would upset her. He was certain that she was not acting.

"I think I know what is wrong with her," his father whispered.

"Can you do something?" Finn asked.

"I can try, but it might not be permanent," Thalanil said.

Finn turned back to Hannah, "My father just wants to take a look at you. You might be… sick. Will you let him?"

Hannah hesitated for just a moment, but then she nodded and scooched out from between the boxes. There was so much blood on her dress that Finn's stomach churned. But he sought to keep his expression completely neutral.

How could Marikoth have done this?!

And Finn wondered what Marikoth had done to the people in the Empire, too. Luckily, time flowed slower there, but Marikoth could do much in a short time. He pushed thoughts of his uncle from his mind. He would know soon enough what Marikoth had in store.

Thalanil gracefully crouched in front of Hannah. His father's hands were suddenly limned with golden light. Finn felt the power of the magic and his father's soul. The threads of light of his life force fluttered tantalizingly close to him. But he didn't want to feed on it. He wanted to simply bathe in its radiance and warmth. His eyelids nearly fluttered shut. He forced himself to look away.

The light from his father's hands suffused Hannah's body. She arched back. Her mouth opened. She was levitating off of the floor. She still kept hold of the dagger until something black and oily escaped from her mouth then she dropped it with a clatter onto the ground.

"Catch the girl," his father commanded.

Finn did as Hannah stopped levitating. His father had the black thing in a cage of gold. It hissed and struck at its magical confines like a snake. Thalanil brought the golden cage tighter and tighter around it. Sweat poured from his father's brow as he crushed the black thing within its prison of gold. Thalanil let out a gasp and curled forward for a moment in exhaustion.

"King Thalanil!" Miles called shrilly and hurried to the Fae king's side.

"Father, are you all right?" Finn cried almost in conjunction.

His father waved him and Miles off. "I am fine. It was a powerful spell. Harder to break than I thought."

Rohan was at his father's side. He put a hand on Thalanil's shoulder and, immediately, his father's head was lifting and shoulders were squaring. Thalanil patted Rohan's hand.

"No more. I truly am fine. And you should save your strength, Rohan," Thalanil urged.

"I will be well restored tonight," Rohan assured him.

They would make love. Even after all of this, Finn could not imagine not making love to Rohan, especially on the eve of battle. His attention went back to Hannah. She was still unconscious. Her breathing was deep as if she were in the depths of sleep.

"Father, Hannah is not awake," Finn said.

His father swung around to her and placed a hand on her sweat-beaded forehead. “No, she will not wake until the morning. It took more out of her than of me to purge that.”

“What was it?” Serxio asked.

“It looked like a snake!” Leonid remarked.

“It was a possession spell. Essentially, this child was a vessel for Marikoth,” his father explained as he got to his feet.

“Good gods!” Serxio breathed. “So he could possess her and make her do whatever he wanted?”

“Including kill?” Leonid asked.

“Yes to both your questions,” Thalanil answered.

“So she didn’t get away from him in the end,” Finn murmured.

“Whether he got to her before we met her or afterwards in the castle… either way that bastard hurt a child!” Leonid hissed.

“Finrael, I will take her to my chambers. She needs to be looked after and watched closely,” his father said. “For while I believe I have gotten all of the foulness out, I cannot be sure. Indeed, my brother could likely still reach her. Until he is dead, she is in danger.”

Finn gave his father Hannah’s limp form. His father gently tucked Hannah against him.

“Then her danger will be over tomorrow. As will all of ours,” Finn said. “He knows I have found the Dreadbrood. I can only hope that he does not yet think I can wield it against him.”

“Tomorrow then is the day of judgment, of fate, of destiny,” his father murmured.

“It is. We should meet before first light. I will tell everyone the plan,” Finn explained.

“Then I will see you before the sun rises.” His father leaned over and kissed Finn’s cheek. “Come, Miles, we must get as much rest as we can.”

“Yes, King Thalanil. Goodnight, everyone!” Miles called even as he hurried after the Fae king.

That left the four of them and the dancing will-o-wisps. The cellar no longer felt eerie, but simply empty. His father had quenched the evil here. The blood on the floor sank into the stones and disappeared as if it had never been.

If only the deaths of Thomas and the others were so easy to wash away.

“Could it really be all over tomorrow?” Serxio asked Finn hopefully.

“It would be hard to believe,” Leonid agreed.

Finn embraced both men. They were surprised as he often kept his distance, but accepted the hugs eagerly.

“Light will follow darkness,” Finn told them. “Marikoth will be ended and the real work will begin after that.”

“If anyone can do it, you can, Finn,” Serxio said.

Leonid nodded. “Proud to fight with you, Finn.”

Finn smiled as Rohan came over and slid an arm around Finn’s shoulders. He looked lighter now that Hannah had been saved.

For the moment. Tomorrow, she will truly be free as will the rest of us. I should not look forward to the death of anyone. But Marikoth must be stopped for his own good if not for all the other things he has done and will do.

Rohan kissed his temple and Finn felt warmth flow through him.

“Let us prepare for the morning, my friends,” Rohan said. “Everything will change then.”

More nods as Leonid and Serxio lead the way out of the cellar. Finn rested his head against Rohan’s shoulder as they followed more slowly.

“Our preparation will be a little different than everyone else’s,” Finn told him as they started up

the stairs. “We must fill each other with strength.”

Rohan kissed him again. “I will give everything I am to you, Finn. Whatever you need is yours.”

BATTLES WE MUST WIN

The wolves were in the bed again. Rohan bit his inner cheek to stop from smiling and outright laughing. Their tails were swishing even though their eyes were studiously closed so they *knew* he was there.

Must not encourage them or we'll never have the bed to ourselves again.

Though really he didn't mind. In the winter, he imagined the wolves would be wonderfully warm even if he did wake up with a mouthful of fur. One would offset the other.

"If you think pretending to sleep will stop me from retaking the bed, you are sorely mistaken," Rohan said as he crossed his arms over his chest. "This is a battle I *will* win, fluffy ones."

He was worried if he *didn't* cross his arms, he would be petting wolf tummies in two seconds flat. They truly were adorable. But he *really* needed the bed tonight with Finn. Lovemaking every night was a must, but this night it was more than that. It literally was battle preparation.

"We're going to war tomorrow, Tyreon, Skye," he told the two adult wolves.

Both of their heads came up and turned towards him. More intelligence than any wolf should have was reflected in their eyes. He loosened his hold on himself and sat on the edge of the bed. He ran a hand from the top of Tyreon's head to the tip of his tail before doing the same to Skye. The wolves only allowed their eyes to half shut. They kept looking at him. He sighed.

"We found the Dreadbrood and Finn has them under his command," he said. "We also found… Well, I am glad you were not in here when the people were killed outside these chambers. I believe you noticed when you returned."

The wolves had been out hunting. Rohan had been incredibly relieved that they hadn't been inside the rooms when they'd been invaded. Marikoth would have had Hannah kill them for sure for they would have defended this place. The Luminus had already been crated up and magically locked. No one would be able to access it until Marikoth was dead.

Tyreon let out a low *woof*. The bodies and the blood had been cleaned up, but to the King of Wolves' keen nose, the scents had likely been fresh and powerful. Skye leaned over and licked Rohan's hand tenderly. She sensed his deep sadness.

"Of all the places that I hoped to keep people safe, Reave Castle was the best of them, but Marikoth has entered here at will two time and taken precious lives," Rohan admitted.

Tyreon nuzzled his hand as he knew that it calmed Rohan to pet him, and pet him he did, scratching him between the ears and beneath the chin.

"Tomorrow, we will march on the Empire," Rohan told them. "The Dreadbrood will be our only army. Myself, Thalanil, Tearlach, and Finn will be with the undead. The rest will remain here behind powerful magical barriers that should be difficult for Marikoth to teleport behind. Serxio and Leonid

are beyond crushed by this, but I told them they have to remain behind to keep the people safe."

Marikoth's ability to teleport was more than worrisome for not only could the Death Mage teleport into the midst of their party, but he could also teleport hundreds of miles away in an instant. That was why Thalanil was coming with them. He could teleport Finn to wherever his brother went. Finn had not wanted anyone else with him, but Rohan had made a good point that Finn's sole focus had to be on Marikoth while he and the others could handle the Fae mages and whatever else Marikoth threw at them. Besides, Rohan was certain that Marikoth would go wherever he was and there was no safer place than by Finn's side. Nor a better place to lure the Death Mage.

"Whether King Nafi or Queen Artremaya choose to be among our party or remain behind is unknown," he told the wolves.

He sighed deeply again. He had met Hugues in the hallway outside his chambers. His uncle had a bottle of wine in one hand and a grim expression on his face.

"Your meeting with Nafi went that well, did it?" Rohan asked.

His uncle grimaced. "I never expected it to be smooth sailing, Rohan. But what truly concerns me is not whether Nafi will come around to the idea of a renewed Empire with vassal states, but whether it matters what he thinks at all."

"Tearlach and Artremaya did indicate his rule was shaky," Rohan agreed with some trepidation.

"It is more than shaky. I believe he came here to flee his political enemies more than to offer aid," Hugues said as he looked longingly at the wine. "Obviously, he didn't say that directly, but I read between the lines."

"Is it that bad for him back in Bolan?" Rohan lifted an eyebrow.

"The blight is not so light there as we've been led to believe. Whole crops have failed this year. His nephew died. Then the True Stone's light faded. His political opponents claim that it is the gods' judgment upon his reign," Hugues said with a twist of his lips. "Religion truly is poison."

"It can be when faith is twisted in the hands of the evil or unscrupulous," Rohan corrected. "I can fix the crops and the True Stone. Shouldn't that show the gods' favor shines upon Nafi again?"

"Yes, but it would perhaps be even more persuasive if the Dreadbrood accompanied Nafi back to Bolan," his uncle said dryly.

"We are not a conquering force. The people of Bolan are not our enemies. We are one Empire," Rohan reminded him.

"Not yet, nephew."

It was daunting to think that getting rid of Marikoth might be the *easiest* part of their plans for the future.

"Did you get a chance to speak to Artremaya?" Rohan asked.

"No, did you?" Hugues asked.

"For a moment only. She was out in the rose garden thinking about what she saw in the Dreadbrood chamber," Rohan said.

"Oh? And what, pray tell, were her thoughts?" Hugues asked, not sounding terribly positive about it.

"Prince Finrael controls an army of monsters, King Rohan," she'd said to him under the bone white moon as they'd wandered past rose bushes thick with blooms. "I never thought that I would be on the same side as such a thing. But that is what you are asking me to be. Normally, one knows one is the villain by the company one keeps."

"The Dreadbrood is terrifying, but so are magic and weapons. Anyone who has been on a battlefield knows that a simple blade is terrifying depending on who wields it," Rohan pointed out.

“But if it is in the hands of one who is defending you, who is good and just and kind then one doesn’t see the blade any longer as terrifying, but as powerful.”

“Powerful?” She lifted an elegant eyebrow. “Perhaps. But when that same blade is suddenly against one’s throat it is terrifying yet again.”

“You worry that we will take Sultane by force with the Dreadbrood?” Rohan asked her baldly.

“Won’t you? Isn’t that what you meant down in the chamber? That you wouldn’t let Nafi and my desire to continue to be regents of our lands hold you back?” she asked. “I can see that you do believe the land must be restored as a single Empire under your leadership to survive.”

He reached for one of the roses. Its sweet scent rose to him as he caressed the delicate petals.

“I once had a temper tantrum before my parents and I were supposed to ride in a royal parade. It was hot. I was tired. I loathed the fancy clothes that seemed to want to strangle me,” he said. “And my father took me aside as I cried and yelled. He did not yell back at me however.”

“It’s the worst when parents *don’t* yell,” Artremaya said with a faint smile.

“True. I though had quite a bit to say about how I didn’t want to be in the stupid parade and I didn’t want to be a prince. I just wanted to go ride in the woods and hunt with my friends,” Rohan continued. “And my father nodded. Agreeing that this sounded wonderful. To be free of the responsibility for other people. For ruling, he told me, was all about being responsible for others. For protecting them. Doing what was right for them even if it was costly to oneself. Who *wouldn’t* want to avoid all that? But the joy of ruling was the same as the burdens. Instead of acting just for oneself or even just your family and friends, your actions benefit so many more people. Ruling means making a difference in countless people’s lives. And wasn’t *that* better than a day of hunting? I admit I was seven so maybe my judgment back then was a little more leaning towards hunting, but I’ve had some years to think about it and come to the conclusion that he was right.”

Artremaya laughed. “Oh, we would have been good friends as children. I loved nothing more than going into the woods and losing myself in nature for days!”

“I think we can still be friends now,” Rohan said quietly. “Because I believe we both still love our hunting, but we love our responsibilities more.”

“Yet you’re asking Nafi and me to give up some of that responsibility to you and Finrael,” she pointed out.

“No, I’m asking you to recognize that you have a responsibility *greater* than just to Sultane and its people,” he contradicted. “By working together, Nafi, you, me, Finn, Hugues, and Thalanil will be responsible for *all* the people of the Empire. Not just our individual kingdoms, but something greater. You won’t only be Queen of Sultane. You’ll be the Queen of Sultane *and* one of the rulers of the Empire of the Eclipse Throne. I’m asking you to take on more responsibility, Artremaya, not less.”

“Well, how did she take it? I like how you worked in there that her power will *increase*,” Hugues said with a rueful look. “I should have used that with Nafi.”

“She said she had a lot to think about,” Rohan said.

“Tomorrow will give her more to consider. I hear that we are attacking the Empire at dawn,” Hugues said.

“There is no reason to wait and a million reasons to act now,” Rohan said.

“Marikoth will be expecting us,” his uncle guessed or knew.

“Yes, he will be. I fear what he will have done to our people behind the Wall,” Rohan said.

“*Our* people.” Hugues smiled. “You have truly expanded your mind, Rohan. You are ready to be king of all.”

“With Finn by my side,” Rohan said.

He finished filling in the wolves about his conversation with Hugues. "So, I would ask that you and your family stay here and protect the people in the castle. Would you do that, Tyreon and Skye? I know that you likely wish to be by Thalanil's side, but he–"

Woof, Tyreon said but Rohan heard, *We will stay. We will protect the people, our king.*

Rohan fisted one hand in Tyreon's thick fur. "Thank you, my friends. I truly hope that the next time we go to sleep in this bed that the world will be completely different."

* * *

FINN FOUND Tearlach getting food from the kitchens. Cook Shelton had roasted him chicken and potatoes. He was tossing bones to his war hounds and then burying his face in a mug of frothy ale.

"Hungry, cousin?" Tearlach asked.

"I could eat," Finn said as he sat down at the coarse, but comfortable table and chairs in the corner of the kitchen.

Cook Shelton immediately brought him some wine, chicken, bread and cheese. He thanked her as he sipped the wine. She stopped for a moment, hands tangled in a cloth, as she asked, "Will Hannah be all right?"

"Oh, yes, she just had a fright," Finn lied.

No one would know about Hannah's possession beyond them. Finn was certain that even kind Cook Shelton would fear the little girl and that was the *last* thing that she needed.

"I was so surprised when King Thalanil carried her out of the cellar! I'd no idea where she'd gotten off to, let alone down there," Cook Shelton said even as her eyes searched his face.

"She thought she saw the Glowing Man and hid," Finn lied easily. "She cut herself in the dark. My father is going to heal her and let her stay near him so she knows that she's safe from Marikoth."

"Oh! The poor little mite! How generous your father is! Not like a royal at all traditionally. Though truly, King Rohan and you are just as kind, as is King Tearlach here." She lightly whipped the Achuvien king with her towel. "Very down to earth!"

"Ach, woman, I told you I'd marry you if you keep making food this good!" Tearlach teased.

"I'm already spoken for, you rascal! Now, I've got another chicken for you on the fire. I best go tend to that," she said and sailed off.

Cleaning a chicken leg clean of meat with his teeth, Tearlach asked, "So what *really* happened to the child?"

"She was spelled by Marikoth to do evil deeds for him and spy upon us. She killed three men in order to use the Luminus. Marikoth knows we've found the Dreadbrood," Finn said succinctly. "So we attack tomorrow at dawn."

Tearlach nodded, evidently not upset at all at the idea of going up against the Death Mage right away. "Better to get it done and over. I'm surprised you're not with our Rohan now getting powered up."

Finn couldn't quite help the blush that coated his cheeks.

"I don't know how you can be shy considering everyone knows each and every time you two are at it. The castle practically explodes," Tearlach teased as he ripped through another chicken wing.

"I will be joining him soon. But we wanted to let everyone know the plan," Finn said. "I assume I can't convince you to stay back at the castle and–"

"No," Tearlach ended that discussion.

"I will be flying on Silver Soul along with my father and Rohan. Stay with the Dreadbrood, Tearlach. While I don't think Marikoth knows of our closeness, he has a bone to pick with you in any case, does he not?" Finn asked.

"Oh, he may, but he didn't kill me then. I think he will have his hands too full against you to pay attention to little old me," Tearlach said.

"Well, in any case, my father has agreed to let me drain him like Marikoth did to see if I can learn his teleportation power," Finn said. "But regardless, he will teleport me to wherever Marikoth is and if that happens to be by you, I will protect you."

"I will be safe as an Achuvien babe." Tearlach grinned.

"If you were up against anyone else, I would not worry about you, but Marikoth–"

"Has an unfair advantage, but now your advantage is larger. But do not worry, little one, I expect to die in battle. I *wish* to," Tearlach assured him. "An Achuvien that dies in his bed has lived a piss-poor life. So if Marikoth slays me in this great battle, do not mourn me."

"I would miss you terribly and feel robbed of your friendship," Finn told him.

Tearlach chuckled. "Now *that* I find it acceptable. But as you told me, I lived before and was reborn. I am certain I will be back and since you and our Rohan live forever, you will be here for me to find," Tearlach said.

"I'm trying to imagine you as a child and I can't!" Finn laughed.

"I was a charming child. Adorable."

"I'm sure." Finn shook his head in amusement. "So any thoughts about tomorrow?"

"Sounds like you have a good plan," Tearlach said as he tossed the chicken wing to one of the dogs, which jumped up and caught it in mid-air.

"Marikoth will have done something hideous," Finn whispered. His hands shredded the chicken in front of him into strips rather than eating it. Tearlach stole it from him. "Hey, that's mine!"

"Then eat it. Don't play with it," Tearlach grunted. After another swallow of dark beer, he belched, wiped his mouth with the back of one hand and said, "Listen, it's better he has done something terrible."

"Better?" Finn lifted his eyebrows.

"Because then the people there know you're overthrowing a tyrant, not your precious Ravenspar uncle," Tearlach pointed out.

"That is true." Finn nodded. "It will make our taking over easier."

"You need all the help you can get. The Fae are fussy and prejudiced. You and Rohan have rounded ears and no red eyes. They need to bloody believe you are Death's Chosen and the Heir of House Aeturnal," Tearlach advised. "Milk all that good will for all it's worth."

"I know." Finn gazed down into his wine. "It just sounds so…"

"Practical? Realistic? Unromantic?"

"Something like that," Finn agreed.

"You're saving them from a people-eating crazy man. They ought to bow down to you for that alone. But you're also going to restore their Empire *and* fix their overgrowth problems. Any one of those things should gain you their eternal gratitude, but it will take all of them for those stiff-necked Fae to not spit after saying your name," Tearlach told him.

Finn took a large swallow of wine. "Do you think none of them will accept Rohan and me?"

"Oh, I'm sure many will. The ones praising your names are not the ones you need to be worried about. Nor the ones who outright disrespect you. It's the ones that smile to your face and shiv you in the back," Tearlach said as he licked his greasy fingers.

The one chicken was almost totally gone. The dogs looked hungrily at the carcass. Finn bit into one leg himself and greasy, delicious juice flowed over his chin. He mopped it up with buttered bread and cheese.

"You'll have to return to Achuvia after this, won't you?" Finn asked. "I know we've kept you for some time."

"Oh, yes, to rip out my enemies' hearts and stick their heads on pikes, but I bet we can get a Luminus or two in Achuvia," Tearlach offered. "And it won't be like we won't visit."

"I'm glad. I think I will need your advice often," Finn admitted. "I like having you near. "

Tearlach chewed and Finn wondered if he'd said the wrong thing or if Tearlach was trying to figure out how to respond to that.

"Oh, don't you worry, I'll be around to help you rebuild your Empire. The Dreadbrood are my charges after all," Tearlach said finally. "And I'm betting there will be a wedding in the offing soon between you and our Rohan."

Finn beamed. "Yes, and there must be a ball. Rohan promised Serxio."

"There will be more than one. People will dance just as heartily as the clock strikes midnight as they do before it," Tearlach agreed.

"Most definitely." Finn grinned.

"Finrael, you will win the people over," Tearlach sounded very serious now. His expression showed the same. "You've got a goodness in you that's… unusual, but you've got the power to back that up. And you've got–got my loyalty too. I would come to your aid whenever and wherever you need. I am not a man who says that to anyone. But you have… have *changed* me."

Finn regarded the Achuvian king. "It is mutual, Tearlach. We have both changed each other. And Achuvia will be treated as much my homeland as Rirea or the Empire. She will have my protection. We are family after all, you and I."

Tearlach reached out and they grasped hands for a moment. "Family." Then he was going back to eating as Cook Shelton was bringing him another chicken. "Now go be with our Rohan. Make the castle *explode*."

THE STROKE OF MIDNIGHT

Finn found a trail of rose petals starting at the door to the king's chambers. There were dark red and white ones. Their sweet scent lingered in the air. Finn couldn't help the sensual smile that lit up his face. It had been all business and strategy and binding people to them through fear or family that night. But his relationship with Rohan was pure and uncomplicated. It was about love and love alone. They were not together for the Empire. That the Empire would thrive with them together was simply a symptom of their love, not the cause of it.

He followed the rose petal trail past Rohan's desk that was piled high with treatises and now spellbooks. He saw that his beloved had once more forgotten to close the ink well and the ink was in danger of drying out. Without touching it, the well closed almost seemingly of its own accord. But no, not on its own at all. It was *his* will, his magic, that was behind it.

Finn beamed. He had feared that his gifts were only to cause death and destruction, but now that he understood he gained gifts from *who* he took energy from, he realized that there was no limit to what he could learn to do. Likely, this gift had come from Ryleth when she'd offered him her energy to get to the Luminus. He had to thank her for it.

The rose petal trail led to the king's bed. It was not yet the large one that could accommodate Finn, Rohan, Tyreon, Skye and their pups–when those pups became full grown too–but it was a beloved bed indeed. He would never let Rohan get rid of it or let others sleep on it. For it was their *first* bed. Perhaps they could move it to a tower room where he might take to napping on it during the day while lazy dust motes danced in the air around him.

We will have to have a large bed not just here, but in every one of the palaces: summer, fall, spring and winter. I highly doubt the wolves will want to be separated from us just because we are at Aymar and not Reave Castle, Finn realized.

He imagined the joy of a freshly built bed made by Fae craftsmen. He wondered if they could make the beds more fun such as in the shape of a curled-up wyvern instead of the usual rectangle. He was certain anything could be made. In truth, Rohan himself could likely create such beds once he got his powers more in control. The stables were quite handsome after all and that was Rohan's first attempt at building something.

Finn grinned at the clean white sheets that covered their current bed and the plump pillows that practically begged him to throw himself down upon them and snuggle in. Furs were strewn over the end of the bed. Their softness called to him to rub them over bare skin. Yet he was still fully dressed in the outfit that he was now certain had been prepared for him by the God of Death. He was just as certain that another outfit–one fit for war–would be in the closet ready for him to wear on the morrow.

He removed the crown Rohan had given him and set it in the jewelry box on the nearest side table. Fat white candles squatted there. Their golden flames flickered in the slight breeze coming in from the open balcony doors. Out of the corner of his eye, a shadow shaped like a raven's wings passed through the doors.

"Rohan?" Finn called out.

"Out here, my love," Rohan answered.

Finn was tugged outside by that beloved voice.

Rohan was standing on the balcony, leaning his powerful form against the railing. The wind stirred the fur blanket he wore revealing his long legs and powerful ass. Heat flowed through Finn, cutting through any of the chill of the night. The sight of Rohan was delightful and the stresses of the day and night drained from his shoulders.

This was what was his.

Forever.

Death might strip many beloved mortals and immortals from their lives for a time–though they might return as Tearlach had pointed out–but Rohan would be there throughout it all. An anchor in the tides of time.

The Rirean king–for one more night only–was looking up at the moon, but turned as Finn came out into the night. An easy smile was on Rohan's lips. And Finn felt even more happiness fill him at his beloved's focus on him.

"You're here at the perfect time. I just got finished ridding our bed of the wolves and their fur," Rohan chuckled.

Finn grinned as he crossed over to his beloved. "So you convinced them to go all on your own? You didn't need my help at all?"

Rohan laughed. "I created a trail of jerky leading to the door–which is what gave me an idea of the rose petals–but when that didn't work, I got on my knees and begged."

"Rohan!" Finn laughed.

"There might have been some tummy kissing involved, too. I cannot say. I would do anything to have our bed for just you and me," Rohan said.

"Until we go to sleep."

"Until we go to sleep," Rohan agreed.

"You love those wolves even more than I do." Finn shook his head.

"Don't say that in front of Leonid. He already thinks I'm weakening their wild nature. But the truth is that they have me wound around their paws," Rohan sighed, but happily.

"You are a devoted alpha of our pack." The wind gusted again and the blanket flattened against Rohan's chest. "Aren't you cold?"

The summer nights were cool in Rirea and the fires were not just for light in the castle. Out here on the exposed balcony, the chill was much more noticeable. Rohan opened the blanket to urge Finn inside of it too.

"You could warm me up," Rohan offered.

"It would be my honor," Finn said.

As he stepped towards Rohan, he felt the wind more keenly than before. Both men gasped as his clothing, from boots to arm wraps, turned into black feathers and were blown away. Finn let out a choked laugh as he was left naked as the day. The feathers broke apart into motes of blue-white light like a wash of stars that drifted away on the wind.

"Did you do that?" Rohan asked.

"I'm not sure!" Finn laughed again. "I knew the outfit was magical, but I wasn't aware that it would disappear at the stroke of midnight!"

They could hear the bells in town ringing to sound the midnight hour. Rohan opened his arms more broadly.

"Magical clothes are not to be trusted. Get in here before you freeze, my love," the Rirean king chuckled.

"With pleasure!"

Finn slid into Rohan's arms. The blanket wrapped around both their naked forms. The silky slide of their skin brought as much warmth to Finn as the fur blanket did. Finn's arms glided around Rohan's taut waist as he laid his head against Rohan's chest. Both of them looked out at the night. The moonlight glittered against the Wall. The light from Aymar could be glimpsed faintly through it. Finn tried not to think of what Marikoth might be doing to prepare for them the next day.

Does he think he can survive this? Even if he believes he can, surely part of him knows that Death is coming for him.

While there was still some pain at the thought that their dreams could only truly begin with someone's death, Finn knew that he really would be ending his uncle's suffering. His hunger was gone now that he and Rohan were together and he did not think that his would have ever become as Marikoth's was now. But that brief taste of even a fraction of what Marikoth was experiencing told him that death was kinder.

"Tonight will be the last night the Wall will exist," Finn said as he snuggled against Rohan's broad, sturdy chest. "I know there was a time when it wasn't there, but I can't really remember that. It will be a good demarcation I think of before and after our rule."

"I think you are right." Rohan was kissing his head softly. "The Wall has had so many meanings for me over the years. Many bad, but still… It was a barrier between me and avenging my parents' deaths."

Finn held him tighter. "I'm so sorry you believed that for so long."

"Yes, though I held that belief as an adult, I realize now that it was a child's cry of pain," Rohan said. "Then it was what was cutting the land off from fertility."

"Little did we know what dangers it kept from Rirea," Finn said, thinking of the creatures that had caused the Fae to have to live in guarded and patrolled prisons of their own creation.

"And perhaps its greatest cruelty was it was keeping us apart," Rohan murmured into his hair.

"We didn't allow it to stand in our way. Silver Soul doesn't even see it." Finn glanced up at the tower where the great wyvern queen had made her lair. The moonlight gleamed on her silver scales. She was watching them. He smiled and waved at her.

Tomorrow we go to war, she whispered.

You have never told me what you wanted for helping me that first time, Finn said.

Be happy. Bring balance. Keep love always in your heart, she answered.

Those are things that benefit me, but what about you? He pressed.

On the contrary, Finrael Ravenspar, what you two do affects everyone, she told him. *Now goodnight, sweet prince. On the morrow, we fly.*

He saw her curl her head down under one wing and felt her mind quiet.

I love you too, Silver Soul, he sent.

A warm wyvern snore was his response. But he was certain she had heard him.

"When your father conjured the Wall one last time," Rohan murmured, "I finally saw it as protection."

"We will not need to be protected any longer from what is beyond the Wall nor them from what is here," Finn said. "For after tomorrow, there will be no border lines between the Empire and Rirea either. We will be one people under one leadership."

"One people under *our* leadership." Rohan kissed his temple.

"Yes. I wonder what will happen to the time currents," Finn murmured.

"I think they will flow over the entirety of the Empire so we are all on one time current. It's something to do with the power stone network," Rohan said.

"What do you think it will do when you've spread the same current over the whole Empire?" Finn asked.

"Time will be kinder to all. Humans will live longer. The Fae will remain eternal, of course. And the land will bloom like it never has before. Spring will be a burst of freshness. Summer verdant. Fall crisp and enticing. Winter crystal cold," Rohan murmured.

Finn could almost see it as Rohan spoke. He pictured himself on a descendant of Sweetfire and Tempest riding through Tanglewood's vineyards. It would be high summer and the smell of grapes ripening on the vine would be a heady spice on the wind. A man would be a few rows over from him. Finn imagined opening his mouth to call out, "Jacob!" But when the man lifted his head and turned towards Finn, he realized that though this person bore a resemblance to Jacob, it was not him.

"King Finrael!" A smile burst across the man's familiar–and yet not–face. "If I had known you were coming this early, I would have been prepared to receive you properly! I thought I had some hours before the whole party arrived."

He wiped his powerful hands over his working clothes. The heat of the sun had him perspiring. Finn waved him off.

"I just came to visit Magna and Emmott by myself, Jasper," Finn said, but there was a sadness in his voice instead of joy at the thought of seeing them.

Jasper nodded, looking somber. "I wish I had known them. Grandfather still tells such tales of Magna's cooking and Emmott's–"

"Eating Magna's cooking and avoiding work?" Finn laughed.

Grandfather? He means Jacob. And I'm not visiting Emmott and Magna. I'm visiting their graves. Oh…

Jasper grinned. "We have some wine laid away from the years they worked here. Would you like me to open some for you?"

"Only if you join me in a glass toasting them," Finn said. "Jacob is at the manor, isn't he?"

Jasper nodded. "I had to shoo him away from the horses earlier. Claims I don't know just the right way to brush them. As if he hadn't taught me himself. He just wants everything perfect for your arrival."

"Everything *is* perfect."

Jacob is still alive! But an old man. Still wanting to take care of everything.

"When will the others be joining us? Still at the usual time?" Jasper's eyes lifted to the skies, evidently searching for wyverns.

"Don't worry, we have plenty of time to reminisce before we're overrun," Finn assured him.

"I love a full house. And it is always an honor to serve you and King Rohan," Jasper assured him. "And we've made sure the larder is well stocked for when King Tearlach arrives."

"My father is coming as well, which means that Miles will be suction-cupped to his side," Finn laughed. "Leonid and Serxio even pried Christopher away from his work at the university."

"So we'll truly have a full house." Jasper beamed.

"We will."

Jasper's head lifted as he searched Finn's face. "And your mother…"

"I'm waiting to visit her resting place. Father and I must toast her together," Finn said. "Tradition."

"Tradition." Jasper smiled and nodded. "One of many beautiful traditions."

"Finn?" Rohan's voice broke Finn out of his imagination. "I lost you."

Finn blinked. "I'm sorry. I was just… thinking about that future. The one you paint where even mortals live long and prosperous lives."

Rohan hummed happily. "I know that death will take some of those we love away from us. That hurts to think of. But I think I've discovered the secret to true immortality."

"What is that?" Finn gazed up at Rohan's face.

Rohan cupped his chin. "To be in each and every moment fully. Time slows and stops when you are truly present. There is no past. No future. Only now and now stretches out for an eternity."

Finn thought of his imagining. He could focus on the thought of Emmott and Magna being gone some day. Of his step brothers, Jacob, Serxio and Leonid grown old and gray with children and grandchildren of their own. Or he could stay in this moment. And suddenly that future, which had seemed almost within a breath's reach, was very, very–almost impossibly–far away. Even the war with Marikoth seemed an eternity from now if he focused on this moment.

"I wish to stay in this moment," Finn whispered.

"Any moment with you is one I wish to stay in forever," Rohan said.

Rohan lowered his head and their lips met in a breath-stealing kiss. Finn felt light headed from it as if his veins were already swimming with wine, but he hadn't touched a drop. Rohan picked Finn up in his arms as if he weighed the same as the feathers that had made up his outfit. They continued to kiss as Rohan carried him into the bedroom and set Finn on the bed.

The fur blanket slid off their entwined forms. Finn's arms were around Rohan's neck. His fingers carded through the Rirean king's hair. Rohan's mouth was conquering his. Lips, teeth and tongue. Heat and wetness. Their magic surged inside of both of them and started to light the air.

Finn's legs wound around Rohan's waist as he pulled his bigger lover into the cradle of his body. His straining cock slid along Rohan's just as engorged one. Finn moaned into their unending kiss. Heat spread up his shaft and settled in his belly. Rohan rocked against him. Their cocks were lined perfectly up against one another. He tightened his fingers in Rohan's hair as he dug his fingers into Rohan's lower back. He needed more friction. He needed more of his beloved.

Rohan's fingers slid down his sides. His thumbs rubbed over Finn's nipples. Finn gasped and moaned as his nipples peaked. Rohan's mouth left his and he was kissing down Finn's throat. Finn arched his neck to give him more access. Hot breath gushed over his skin. Bites, licks and the drag of Rohan's tongue had Finn keening.

When Rohan reached the hollow at the base of his throat, his lover lapped there, tasting his skin. Then he was dropping to those already peaked nipples. Teeth and tongue rasped over them. Finn's fingernails dug into Rohan's scalp and then traveled down his spine leaving his marks there.

Magic flowed out of them in gorgeous waves. Finn could see it. Golden light that suffused the air and caused it to ripple. Rohan was reaching over to the nightstand where there was that fragrant oil he used to ease the way. Finn's anus quivered as he awaited slick fingers to push inside of him, spread him wide, and make him ready for Rohan's love.

Finn brought his knees up to his chest and rolled his ass up so that it was exposed for Rohan's use. The jar was brought onto the bed. Rohan slicked his fingers, but he first went to Finn's opening with

his mouth. His glorious mouth.

Finn gasped as Rohan's tongue followed the swirl of tight muscle at the entrance to his body. He clenched his ass cheeks unconsciously. Rohan chuckled and pried open with his thumbs. Shivers of pleasure ran through Finn.

Rohan's mouth was again covering his opening. His tongue pushed into his silken interior. Finn's head thrashed on the pillow. His opening eased. Rohan's tongue flickered in and out over and over again until Finn was panting with just that intrusion into him.

Rohan kissed his opening tenderly before his fingers took the place of his tongue. A single finger wiggled inside of Finn. He clenched down on it, loving the sensation of having something of Rohan's firmly inside of him. Rohan continued to work it in and out, millimeters at a time, until Finn's muscles released and he sank it up to the knuckle into Finn's heat and tightness.

A second finger joined the first. He scissored them apart as he drew them both out. Finn's breathing hitched as they delved deeper than the single finger had. His hips shifted. Rohan kissed the interiors of his thighs. He licked that tender flesh right at the joint between leg and torso.

Finn's body surrendered as three fingers thrust inside of him. He could not resist the sensation of being plunged into and pulled out of. His nerve endings sizzled and spat as Rohan's fingers found his prostate and pressed against it. Fireworks appeared behind his closed eyelids as Rohan continued to rub and press that spot. His cock plumped yet more and smacked against his belly as his hips moved convulsively.

"You're so beautiful," Rohan breathed. "How I love you, my one and only. Forever."

And then Rohan was mounting him, unable to hold back any longer, and Finn was so glad. The magic and arousal was on the edge of exploding from within him. He wanted Rohan to explode with him. To send a wave of power and life out into the world that would heal and herald their coming. Whatever Marikoth thought he was doing, their lovemaking would prove to even the darkest part within him that Finn and Rohan were *meant*.

Rohan positioned his cock at the opening to Finn's body. It was coated in the oil, but Finn was ready for him. Still, there was the faintest burn as Rohan's manhood thrust into him, sank deep and their bodies became one. There was always a little pain in pleasure. It steadied Finn, anchored him in this moment.

Rohan's hands were on either side of his head. They kissed. Slow and long. Rohan moved only his lips and tongue. His body was pressed securely against Finn's. That sensation that they were two halves of the same whole–life and death, creation and destruction–filled Finn. He smiled into their kisses and his hands ran over Rohan's front. His fingers found his lover's nipples and he twisted and tweaked them until Rohan grunted and shifted his hips. Only then did Finn let his hands drift to Rohan's waist, urging him to move more.

Rohan pushed seemingly deeper inside of him before he pulled out and then rolled forward. Finn's body was jolted at the powerful inward thrust. Rohan anchored him by holding onto Finn's hips firmly, controlling them, keeping them where he wanted them. Finn bit Rohan's lower lip as Rohan kept only the tip of his cock inside of Finn, teasing him, before plunging back inside.

Love you, love you, love you.

Finn didn't know if he cried that out loud or just that it filled every part of his mind and body then was carried on the waves of magic that escaped them. Rohan's mouth was covering his again so it seemed impossible the words could have been spoken, but he heard answering ones in Rohan's voice.

I love you. Forever and always. You are my Empire. The only Empire that matters. Make me

your king and I will serve you forever more, Rohan said.

I am yours and you are mine, Finn responded even as their tongues tangled.

The bed creaked as Rohan's hips moved with grace and power. Spearing Finn into the mattress. Their fingers were linked together, pinned to the bed, as they moved. Coming together. Pulling apart. Then coming together again like the tide. Like the inevitable rise and fall of the sun.

Rohan's body pressed fully against Finn's once more. His cock was so deep inside of Finn that he couldn't feel where it ended and he began. His own cock swelled between them. His balls were hot and tight. He cracked his eyelids open as their kisses continued.

He met Rohan's gaze as both of them rose up onto the very top of the wave of arousal. The whole room was gold. Rohan's eyes were gold. Glorious happiness and a feeling of completeness filled Finn. This was what he was made for. Not to bring death and destruction or to lead the Dreadbrood. But to love and be loved.

I will love you. Always and forever, he heard Rohan say in his mind.

Yes, Rohan, always and forever, Finn sent back.

Then the wave crested and Finn felt his orgasm take him. Their magic exploded out of them in a burst of light as bright as the sun. It flew out over the castle and then beyond. It kept going. Blanketing the world in gold.

Later, they would learn that the light had gone well beyond the Wall. Those who were frightened, those who thought the end was coming for them, those who had lost all hope in the current Empire under Marikoth's rule found themselves turning towards the Wall and what lay beyond. Their hearts leaped in their chests and a sense that help was coming washed over them. They were not alone. Their saviors were coming. They just had to hang on a little longer.

Rohan's body settled on top of Finn's. They both just breathed as Finn carded his fingers through Rohan's sweat-drenched hair. The aftershocks of their joining still jolted both their bodies. Sparks appeared in the air above them and all around the bed.

Rohan's head was pillowed on Finn's chest. He felt his beloved's breath against his bare skin and felt his heartbeat. Finn smiled. Whatever came after this, they would face it together. Whatever came after this, a part of them would always be in this perfect moment where nothing could touch them. Whatever came after this was *theirs* forevermore.

TO THE DEATH

Dawn was only a hint on the horizon. The stars still sparkled in the night sky, but the moon was gone. The Wall looked mostly black with just a hint of dark green to it. Any birdsong that might have begun swelling as the day was about to begin was silent, as were the Dreadbrood that caused living things to flee. They were standing in formation along the section of the Wall nearest Aymar. Unending rows of monsters that stood over seven feet tall.

There were creatures that looked like wolves on two legs. Skeleton warriors that were even bigger than Tearlach. Some of them rode skeletal horses that dwarfed a normal horse by three times. There were massive creatures with four arms and four legs that could crush a skull to powder. Multi-headed beasts with teeth so sharp that Rohan thought he could be cut just by looking at them. Slithering serpents whose bones showed through their tattered skin. But their fangs dripped poison that caused the earth to smoke. It was as if all of the monsters slain by heroes and villains alike had been gathered by Death to fight for it under one banner.

Rohan and Thalanil were standing at the front of the group, nearest the Wall. Tearlach sat on his giant warhorse behind them. His flaming sword sizzled and spat. The horse seemed not to care. His warriors flanked him. None of them appeared afraid even though the Dreadbrood was just feet away. But Rohan thought that was as much bravado as training.

Finn was not yet with them.

"How do you feel, Thalanil?" Rohan asked as he adjusted Lightbringer in its scabbard. It sensed battle was near and was restless to be drawn. "I know that Finn had to take more energy from you than he was comfortable with in order to test if, like Marikoth, he could teleport himself."

"Gifting Finrael teleportation would have been worth it even if he'd taken double or triple the amount," Thalanil assured him. "He won't have my pinpoint accuracy with the gift as he'd had little time to practice, but it will be enough should he and I get separated and he needs to get to Marikoth on his own."

"Yes, he just has to get within touching distance and then it will all be over." Rohan offered, "I could give you some of my strength. Finn will be restoring me as we battle."

"After last night…" Thalanil cleared his throat, "I have felt quite *energetic*. So no, I need no replenishing."

Rohan blushed and grinned. "Can't quite hide our love from the world."

"No, indeed not. The whole area here is budding with grass and flowers. Shame the Dreadbrood are killing it all," Thalanil said with a twist of his lips as he saw the new shoots being crushed under the Dreadbrood's feet.

"Whatever Finn and I did before taking over the Empire was always going to be temporary. When

I activate the whole of the power stone network is when the true healing can begin," Rohan said. "This will be a verdant land. You'll be able to smell the green things growing with every step. And the Empire will be able to breathe as plants and animals will have the space to grow and thrive."

"I look forward to it. We are so close to that future, Rohan, but so far. Many things can go wrong."

Thalanil looked over his shoulder back towards Reave Castle where Finn remained, checking that the others were safely ensconced behind Ryleth's shields, and changing into a special outfit that the God of Death had left for him. Not even Rohan had seen it yet. He wondered if it, too, would disappear at the stroke of midnight. They would have to make sure that there was a robe handy in case that happened again.

Thalanil was dressed in dark green robes with a high collar that rose almost above the top of his head. They sparkled when he moved as there was a magical shield lying over the material making it more formidable to blades and arrows than plate mail. Not to mention it would reflect all spells back upon their user. Throw a fireball at Thalanil and it would fly screaming back at the caster.

Rohan had on chain mail that allowed him freedom of movement but more protection than his leathers. Thalanil had shown him how to cast a shield spell upon it to mimic his own. The chest plate had an Aeturnal symbol pressed into the center: an infinity mark made of vines and flowers. He had a red and gold handkerchief with the De Clare symbol inside his armor, but from now on, his connection to that line was to be subsumed by his connection to his Aeturnal blood. It was a price he was willing to pay to restore the land and stay with Finn forever.

But both of them knew that neither outfit would protect them from Marikoth. Only Finn could save them if Marikoth caught them.

"I cannot see anything through the Wall in this light," Rohan said as he squinted to see if there were any shapes massing on the other side.

"I am certain he is there," Thalanil murmured. "I wonder how many he has convinced to fight for him."

"I don't think *convinced* is the right word unless you mean *threatened* by that," Rohan said dryly. "The last time he and I spoke, he appeared half mad. He was draining people in the throne room like one would consume alcohol at a feast."

Thalanil closed his eyes for a moment and murmured a Fae prayer. Rohan was interested in the fact that it contained a plea to the God of Death to wing the dead to a sweet rest. He wondered if that was a new addition or if it had always been there.

"I assume you and Finrael will wish to use the old Aeturnal thrones rather than the Ravenspar ones when you take over," Thalanil said after opening his eyes. "They won't have been *contaminated* by my brother in any case so that is an additional good thing."

"He can't contaminate anything, Thalanil. Marikoth is a single, lone madman. Many good kings and queens of the Ravenspar line have sat on those thrones. Marikoth's short span upon them does not change them in any way," Rohan told him.

Thalanil glanced over at him, a small smile on his lips. "I am glad that I decided to teach you magic, Rohan."

Rohan realized that Thalanil was saying far more than those words conveyed and answered, "So am I, Thalanil."

The Fae king nodded back. Message received. As Tearlach would say, "We are family."

There was a rush of wind that came from Reave Castle. Rohan twisted around to face it, but he had to cover his eyes with one arm as the chill flowed over them. Tearlach let out an eager laugh.

"Ack, the little one is riding his dragon!" Tearlach pointed to Silver Soul, the wyvern queen, who

sailed out from Reave with a figure in black and silver riding her.

The Dreadbrood's heads snapped up towards Finn. They tracked him as he sailed overhead. They never lost sight of him even as Silver Soul spiraled down until she landed ahead of them on the road to Aymar with a *boom*. Rohan's breath caught in his throat.

Finn looked magnificent.

And *terrifying*.

He wore all black with silver armor pieces strapped on over his calves and forearms to match the silver spiky crown that rose up four inches from his head. It was like a crown of ice blackened by fire, but unmelted, unbowed. The collar of his chest piece rose up around his slender neck, completely covering it.

There were designs of skulls with vines running through their eye sockets and where their spines should be stamped upon the leather pieces. Wispy almost see-thru sections of cloth hung from Finn's waist to his knees, giving the armor an almost tattered look as if he truly were an undead king risen from his ancient grave to bring death to his enemies.

Finn met Rohan's gaze and there was only the slightest softening in his now all-black eyes. Rohan understood. Finn must be Death's Chosen right now. Not his beloved, warm and gentle Finn, but a general of Death's Army.

Finn's gaze then moved to his father. Rohan glanced at Thalanil. The Fae king met his son's black eyes evenly and inclined his head. Finn's magic was magic. Maybe that was what Thalanil felt. For wasn't all magic terrifying on some level?

Then Finn was looking out upon the Dreadbrood. They stared back at him with fervent devotion. He was their leader. He would unleash them to kill once more. No matter if their limbs were hacked off or their head cleaved from their bodies, they would still fight on.

"Death's Chosen!" Tearlach called, drawing his flaming sword out and pointing it at the sky. "We from Achuvia offer to join your Dreadbrood for the day!"

"Achuvia is the Land of Death and home to the Dreadbrood and me. We are honored to accept you to fight as one, King Tearlach, our Necromancer," Finn intoned. "Let Death's Blessing be upon you."

The jewel in Finn's staff glowed redly. Finn tipped it towards Tearlach and his warriors. They were suffused with red light. All of them shouted their battle cries into the air. These humans were filled with magic of a sort that Rohan could not quite understand. But then he saw the grass shrivel under their horses' hooves.

Death's Blessing. I see.

"It is time to face our enemy," Finn said and his voice carried on a spectral wind. "Father, Rohan, join me."

Silver Soul offered them a forelimb to clamber up on. Using a touch of magic, both of them easily sprang up without assistance. Thalanil gave a brief nod to Rohan to show his approval at his growing use of magic. They seated themselves behind Finn, but they were facing to either side. From their vantage points, both of them could hurl magic wherever it needed to go and Thalanil could teleport Finn if Marikoth decided to run.

He will run. Either that or he will try to destroy as many of our people as he can.

When Rohan thought "our" he meant the Fae and not just the ones who fought with them that day or were shielded in Rirea. But then all thought left him as Silver Soul lifted her head and roared before lifting into the sky. They headed towards the Wall. The first rays of dawn were hitting the Wall when it winked out of existence and they could see the Empire beyond. Arrayed against them as far as the eye could see were Fae mages and warriors all dressed in the various colors. Shields and spells

bloomed like virulent flowers.

"Those are the colors of every province in the Empire," Thalanil said. "My brother has aligned everyone against us."

"No," Rohan said with a shake of his head as a wave of emotion came to him from the Fae. He realized then that he was not just connected to the land, but to its people, too. "The energy coming off of them is *wrong*. I can feel their emotions. There's no anger here. Not at us in any case. It's fear."

"The Dreadbrood?" Finn asked.

"Yes and no. They are fighting out of fear. They do not wish to be here," Rohan said.

"Can you reach them, Rohan?" Thalanil asked. It was almost pleading.

"Finn, take us down," Rohan requested.

"What about Marikoth?" Finn asked. "I do not sense him…"

"I will seek him out with my magic, Finrael! But please, let us see what afflicts our people," Thalanil cried.

Silver Soul immediately began to descend. Tearlach and the Dreadbrood still remained in Rirea. When they landed, one of the shields winked out and a woman with bronze hair and dark gray armor approached them. She had a longbow strapped to her back and her red eyes regarded them evenly.

"Lady Regalus," Thalanil greeted her. "What are you doing?"

"What we must," she answered.

"If you continue with this path, you will die," Finn said.

Her eyes lifted to his and then quickly away. "It doesn't matter."

"What are you talking about?" Rohan found that he could *reach* her with his magic.

She gasped and looked up at him, searching his face. "You…"

"Yes," Rohan said. "It *is* me."

"Of course, it would be *you*. After all these millenia, the Aeturnals return." She let out a shrill laugh, which had Rohan's shoulders tightening. "We felt you last night."

"Not just me. Finn and I," Rohan told her.

"But he's–"

"My son and your future king," Thalanil quickly asserted.

"You need not fear me, Lady Regalus," Finn told her. "Only if you stand against us will I harm you, but it is not my desire to do so otherwise. You are our people. We will protect you from the true danger."

"I actually believe that," she said with another brittle laugh. "But it does not matter."

"Why doesn't it matter?" Rohan asked, confused.

"Because Marikoth has our children," she answered. "And unless we battle you with everything we have, he will drain them to death."

PROMISE

Miles looked at Hannah. The little girl was seated beside him at one of the long tables the scholars had set up in the tomb. She had a blanket wrapped around her. He'd brushed her hair and helped her put on a nice new dress, but she'd been listless and yet would flinch at any unexpected sound. Even though Thalanil had been focused on the task ahead with Marikoth, he had clearly been worried about Hannah too.

"Miles, you must keep an eye on her when I'm gone. Don't leave her by herself. Not even for a minute. Do you understand?" Thalanil had said as Miles had helped him with his tunic.

"Of course, King Thalanil. I will stay right by her side," Miles assured him.

"Thank you, Miles. I want you to keep this by your side." Thalanil reached over to his weapons and handed Miles a beautiful silver dagger in a sheath etched with Fae runes.

Miles took the dagger. It was a work of art. Light yet solid. When he pulled out the blade it was glowing an icy blue.

"I've never used anything like this–"

"The blade is spelled. It will defend you," Thalanil answered. "What you lack in skill, it will make up for."

"You think Hannah will be in danger?" Miles asked.

So many emotions flickered across Thalanil's face before he said, "If Hannah is in danger, I am certain that you will defend her, too. But this is for *you*, Miles. I want you to defend yourself against anything and *anyone*."

"You think that Hannah might…" Miles drew in a breath.

Thalanil grimaced. "My brother is desperate. And so long as he lives, Hannah is open to his compulsion."

"He'll be so busy fighting you and the Dreadbrood, he won't think of Hannah, I'm sure!"

Thalanil patted his hand. "I truly hope you are right. But please keep that by your side and keep her there as well."

Miles had stuck the dagger through his belt along his spine. His jacket covered it up. But still he was acutely aware of it even if no one else was. He watched as Cook Shelton put a cup of steaming tea in front of Hannah. She offered him one as well, which he took. Hannah barely registered it all and Miles found himself pressing his back against the chair so that he could feel the whole length of the dagger. Cook Shelton stroked Hannah's hair before giving him a smile and heading off to serve others. All thecastle staff and guests were in the tomb, waiting for the outcome of the war, while Tyreon and Skye patrolled the upper stories of the castle in case danger came from there.

"This isn't exactly the nicest place to be, is it?" Nafi sniffed. "Considering what came out of *there*

this morning."

"Ryleth said it was the best place for the shielding spell," Artremaya answered. "There is natural power in this place, plus multiple exits if we must flee."

The Dreadbrood had marched out that other exit that morning. According to Christopher there had been a magical door and everything that had been spelled to look like a cliffside. Miles hadn't gotten to see it himself. Not that he wanted to see nasty dead soldiers. He'd actually witnessed enough of them as they'd marched past the front of the castle, oddly silent but for the thump of their feet.

"Why Marikoth should attack us is beyond me! We are not even supporting this war," Nafi continued. "Rohan should have waited until we were well out of it."

"You know they could not wait. And we *are* a part of it," Artremaya countered. "Marikoth's plan wasn't to simply stay within the current Empire. Our kingdoms were next to be invaded after Rirea."

Artremaya shifted from one booted foot to the other. Unlike Nafi who was dressed in voluminous gold and orange silks, she had on a simple leather set of armor in dark brown. A longbow was strapped to her back along with a full quiver. Two swords hung from her waist. Her people were similarly armed. Nafi had a full retainer of warriors, too, but the king did not look like he intended to lift a finger if they were attacked while Artremaya appeared ready to lead the charge.

"Can Marikoth really just *appear* here?" Nafi sounded annoyed.

"Finrael was quite certain of it. As were Ryleth and Thalanil," Artremaya answered evenly, but Miles could tell her patience with the other monarch was wearing thin.

"Well, I suppose I would teleport away from the Dreadbrood, too, if one could. It smells of them here. And are we certain that none were left behind? That they couldn't try to turn us into one of them like they nearly did with Ryleth and that servant?" Nafi scowled at his tea.

"That occurred because Thomas and Ryleth entered the chamber without permission," Miles answered. "Now that Finn's in charge of the Dreadbrood, we should be perfectly safe even if we walked down there alone."

Nafi stared at him. "And who are *you*, young man?"

"Prince Finrael's step brother," Miles answered.

"*Step* brother? And who are your parents? Your family? Do you have Fae roots, too?" Nafi was gazing at him speculatively.

Miles had gotten the impression that Nafi only spoke to those that had title and position, which was not like Finn, Rohan or Thalanil for that matter. They treated everyone as equals. Miles understood Nafi's opinion. It had once been his own. But, then again, who was Nafi compared to those other three? He was hiding here with no weaponry, expecting everyone else to run around for him and protect him.

"What does it matter, Nafi?" Artremaya frowned at the other monarch. "He's Finrael's step brother and attendant to King Thalanil."

"I am just curious." Nafi shrugged, but Miles was certain that it still *did* matter to him.

"And did Finrael tell you this, Miles, about the reason for the attack?" Artremaya asked.

"My brother did. Christopher. He's over there with Ryleth." Miles pointed to where Christopher and Ryleth were looking at a set of runes at the very interior of the passage that led to the Dreadbrood chamber.

Christopher was dutifully taking down the exact runes and the translation that Ryleth was telling him. He knew his brother was edging on seeing the transformation chamber. He was also certain that Christopher wanted to test it, likely with live subjects.

"He was the one to save Ryleth's life, was he not?" Artremaya asked.

"He's always been clever. But Father didn't want him to…" Miles pressed his lips together as he realized he had spoken of their father with a stranger. He wiped his hands on his thighs. He'd talked to Thalanil about his father. Thalanil wished to know what had happened to Finn when they'd all lived together before, but he seemed not to blame Miles or Christopher for how badly they had acted towards Finn. And it helped him to speak of their father too. He would get upset at times, but Thalanil was always so kind to him. He no longer panicked or shut down. So he wouldn't do that now. He cleared his throat and said, "He's always been very clever. King Thalanil is going to get him into one of the Fae universities."

"That's very impressive all around. A human at a Fae university. But I suppose there might be quite a bit of that in the future. Humans and Fae living and working together all over the Empire." Artremaya's expression was distant.

"You aren't seriously considering making Sultane into a *vassal* state, are you, Artremaya?" Nafi's tone was dismissive, but his eyes were keen.

Artremaya refocused on him. "The treaty our ancestors signed does appear to recognize that there would be a time when the Empire would have to be reassembled."

"Bah! In emergencies we are to work together, but not as–as underlings to another king!" Nafi argued, but he was still keenly watching Artremaya's reaction to his argument. He was also very aware of Lord De Clare who was chatting with some of the staff, but definitely making his way over to the two monarchs.

"Are we not in an emergency?" she asked.

"Once this Marikoth is bested the emergency will be over," Nafi harrumphed.

"Marikoth is only *one* of the emergencies we are facing. The greater one would definitely seem to be the blight," Artremaya reminded him.

"Hugues tells me that unless Rohan and Finrael are *ruling* over the entirety of the restored Empire that the magic won't work properly. That sounds absurd to me." Nafi crossed his arms over his chest.

"Does it?" Artremaya lifted an eyebrow. "Last night was the first time you've been here for… for… Well, Rohan and Finrael's joinings." Color flooded her cheeks, but she pressed on, "Tell me that you didn't experience something extraordinary afterwards."

Nafi fiddled with his embroidered sleeve. "Does that happen *every* night?"

"Yes." Artremaya's lips twitched into what was suspiciously like a smile. "Every night and every morning."

"And they cannot control–"

"I think the *point* is," Artremaya overrode him, "that everything and everyone reacts to the joining. I could feel…" Here she stopped and searched for words before continuing, "life pouring into me. But also a connection between me and everything and everyone too."

"So you're going to agree to become a vassal state?" Nafi asked again.

"I am going to agree to become one of the rulers of the greater Empire," Artremaya corrected. "I will be the Queen of Sultane *and* an imperial leader. What will you be, Nafi?"

The King of Bolan opened his mouth. Miles was curious what he was going to say, but it was then that he noticed that Hannah was missing.

* * *

SERXIO SIGHED. How many times had he gone up and down the stairs from the kitchens down to the

crypt? His leg muscles told him that it was too many times. He was about twenty feet from the crypt steps and he just had to rest for a minute.

"What are you doing, lazy bones?" Leonid asked, sounding bright and cheery and not at all winded, as he came up behind Serxio.

"Lazy? I will have you know that I've climbed a hundred flights today! I am merely–merely–"

"I've climbed them with you, Serxio, and what I see is a man out of shape! You need to join me in practice more often instead of sleeping in," Leonid continued to sound pleased as punch with himself.

"Some of us have *reasons* for remaining in bed, Leonid," Serxio sniffed.

"If you break any more kitchen maid hearts, Cook Shelton is going to break yours!" Leonid rumbled.

"I have moved on from kitchen maids. I recognize that our food suffers when I invariably must move on to spread my person to others," Serxio informed him.

"*Spread* your what now?"

"Leonid, the joy I bring cannot be centered on just one person. I must share the wealth with all and sundry," Serxio said, buffing his nails against his tunic, which was bright green today.

"I wonder if the people you're *spreading* things to appreciate that fact?" Leonid replied dryly.

"While they may not, at first, I believe they will come to understand it in time," Serxio said.

"Admit that you're afraid of commitment, Serxio!" Leonid shook his head. "Their feelings are not what you are protecting or spreading or whatever! You're trying not to care about anyone so that you won't be hurt if…"

Leonid said nothing more. He knew the story of Serxio's lost beloved.

"There won't be another like her, Leonid," Serxio said softly. "So you and I will have to grow old together as bachelors."

"Who says that I won't find someone?" Leonid squawked.

"Oh, Leonid, you sweet summer child, no one else would put up with your eccentric cleaning habits or lack thereof and–"

"Hey! Who goes there?" Leonid's voice was sharp and authoritative.

Serxio turned to where his best friend was looking. It was at the top of the stairs where someone was moving rather furtively. But at the sound of Leonid's voice they popped up rather like a corn kernel in hot oil.

"Oh! Oh!" A male voice cried out.

It took Serxio a moment to recognize it. "Miles? Miles, what are you doing there? Creeping about?"

"Serxio? Leonid? Oh, thank the gods it's you!" The young man raced towards him. He was carrying a dagger.

"Ah, lad, what's with the weapon?" Leonid asked.

Miles looked down at the unsheathed dagger that was clearly Fae. "King Thalanil gave it to me to defend myself in case…"

"In case of what? Is something wrong downstairs?" Serxio asked, straightening up.

"No, I mean I don't think so. She must have gone this way, because Christopher and Ryleth swear she didn't go into the Dreadbrood chamber so–"

"She? Do you mean *Hannah*?" Serxio asked and a trill of dread went through him.

Hannah was a sweet little girl who brought him sweets secretly and carried his notes to certain ladies, loving the romance of it all. But she had also been controlled by Marikoth to do terrible

things. She'd somehow killed three grown men.

Miles nodded miserably. "I was supposed to look after her! King Thalanil made me promise. I just looked away from her for a few moments–"

"It's all right, lad." Leonid patted his shoulder. "Go back downstairs. We'll find Hannah–"

"No! Please let me go with you!" Miles begged. "I've already failed in my promise. I won't go downstairs while you take all the risks. I've got a magic dagger!" Miles held up the blade. "King Thalanil says it's spelled to make me a good fighter."

Serxio couldn't quite believe that. But surely between him and Leonid, they could take on Hannah. Couldn't they?

"All right, Miles, but you stay *behind* Serxio and me. Do you understand?" Leonid demanded to know.

Miles nodded.

"All right, well, if she didn't go into the Dreadbrood chamber, and since she didn't come past us, there's only one way she could have gone." Leonid pointed ahead towards where the hallway continued to a door that opened up near the beach. "Let's go."

The three of them began to hustle down the hallway. Serxio grimaced as his tired muscles protested the rapid pace, but he would never live it down if Miles outran him.

Serxio asked rather breathlessly, "The door down there was repaired, wasn't it? Locked too and guarded so–"

"It *was* guarded, but we pulled back people into the crypt as no one expected Marikoth to walk into the castle," Leonid admitted.

"So why is she going there? As you said, it can't be to let Marikoth in. He'd just teleport into the castle," Serxio got out.

"Perhaps she's trying to escape and get to him," Leonid offered.

"Her only value to him is that she's here," Serxio argued.

"Maybe she's letting someone else in then," Miles suggested.

Serxio's mouth opened and shut. "Oh, dear, that can't be good."

They ran faster. Serxio groaned internally and externally, but he kept up. They reached the door just as his legs were starting to give out.

"Hannah!" Leonid cried out. "Hannah, stop! Don't do that!"

Hannah was undoing the locks on the door. She paused at Leonid's shout and looked over at them. Her eyes were *red*. All three of them had their weapons out, but even with red eyes, it was still Hannah they were looking at. Her expression was empty of any recognition. She was like an automaton.

"Hannah, dear girl, it's *us*!" Serxio said as the three of them skidded to a halt a few feet away from her.

She didn't appear to have any weapons on her. But she had taken things such as kitchen skewers and made them into deadly weapons. Who knew what other powers Marikoth had imbued her with?

"Hannah, please step away from the door," Leonid said, casting his voice low and soothing. "We need to keep that locked. It's not safe."

Hannah blinked slowly.

"C'mon, Hannah, it's Serxio, Leonid and Miles," Serxio said, indicating each of them in turn. "We're your friends. Do you remember us? Do you–"

Another blink. Was the red flickering in and out of her eyes? Was she blinking more rapidly now?

"S-Serxio?" Hannah's voice sounded so uncertain and hollow. Almost as if she was speaking

from far away.

"It's me!" Serxio nodded eagerly.

"Hannah, please don't do whatever it is that you're going to do," Miles said with a desperate tinge to his voice. "We're your friends. Everyone here is your friend. You don't want anything bad to happen to us, right?"

The red really was coming and going.

"I–I–no, I don't want anything bad to happen to you–"

Her voice was suddenly cut off as she went rigid. The red was firmly back in place. She disengaged the locks. There was a solid *thunk-thunk* sound. And the door began to open. They heard the moans before they saw the undead.

"Hannah! Damnit!" Serxio hissed as he saw the door open and countless undead appear behind it. "There are too many for us to kill! We have to get back to the crypt!"

"But Hannah!" Miles cried.

Already though the undead were streaming in with Hannah in their midst. They didn't notice her at first until she gave out a shrill cry of fear.

"Oh! What are these things? Oh, no! NO!" she screamed.

Serxio didn't even get a chance to raise his daggers before Miles shot past him. The weapon in his hand glowed a hot blue-white and seemed to move with a mind of its own, taking Miles along with it. The undead surrounding Hannah were down on the ground. Miles grabbed the little girl's hand and yanked her towards them even as more undead shuffled inside. Urging Miles and Hannah ahead of them, Serxio and Leonid picked up the rear.

"Run for the crypt! Our only hope is the shield!" Serxio cried. "Run! RUN!"

And this time, his legs didn't protest at all.

THE BATTLE BEGINS

"Where is Marikoth, Lady Regalus?" Finn growled.

He knew his black eyes were glowing hotly at her. She did not quail under his gaze though he saw her swallow and shift uncomfortably.

"Even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you!" Lady Regalus said with a bitter smile. "He drained my son. I won't lose my daughter, too. Even talking to you is a risk that I should not be taking."

Finn's heart clenched. He saw the pain in her eyes. It was like a raw wound. Fae didn't have many children. To have two was a miracle. To lose both of them? Even for mortals such a loss was agony, but for the Fae, who expected to live forever, it was unthinkable. She would fight with everything she had against them, because every strike of her blade and every spell she flung was for her daughter. To keep her daughter alive. There was no argument they could make to sway her.

"If you tell us where Marikoth is we can end this," Rohan said, his voice humming with urgency and care. "You must understand that he will kill your children and you anyways! He's mad. He's lost himself. Surely, you know this!"

She jerked back at that almost as if he had physically struck her. But then she shook herself. She had to believe that she could save her daughter. Finn didn't have to read her mind to know the mental gymnastics she went through in her head to keep her resolve. To believe that there was no hope but Marikoth's death likely seemed impossible. She would fight. Her daughter would live. Anything else was simply too hard to process and too much risk to bear.

"How many of our children will die before you do end him, if you even can?" Lady Regalus asked. "We have no choice. No matter who you are to us." She faltered for a moment as she clearly believed that Rohan was the rightful heir to the throne. "It doesn't matter. We must fight. We must."

She turned on her heel and started back towards the shielded group of Fae mages. Finn was not going to stay on the ground and find out what those Fae mages would do once she reached them and they started their battle. The air already sizzled with magic. He could not only smell it but taste it. That bitter ozone flavor coated his tongue and flowed down his throat.

Up, Silver Soul. Out of their range, Finn sent.

The wyvern queen was rising up into the air before Lady Regalus had gone two steps. Soon they were flying high above Aymar's towers.

Desperation. Many of them will die this day. Marikoth is responsible for it, Finrael, not you, Silver Soul said. *He has a blade to every one of their throats. It doesn't matter if a Dreadbrood does the cutting.*

I know, Finn said. *But I am uncertain if the others understand that.*

"They don't want to fight us. They are under duress!" Rohan struck his right fist against his thigh.

“Perhaps if we don’t march the Dreadbrood forward then the war won’t begin. They’ll just remain where they are and we’ll have a stalemate until we find Marikoth.”

Rohan stopped speaking as the Fae mages began to send fireballs, corkscrews of lightning, ice knives and plasma bolts towards Tearlach and the Dreadbrood. Finn had the Dreadbrood bring up their shields for themselves and also for Tearlach and his people. The magic mostly bounced off them, diffusing into the ground. Those volleys that did cause damage to the Dreadbrood were few and far between. Not that it mattered. Wounds wouldn’t stop a Dreadbrood soldier from fighting and fighting and fighting.

“It doesn’t look like they are doing much damage,” Rohan remarked. “If the Fae stay where they are–damnit!”

The Fae had started advancing. Even though they had better positioning where they were, even though the Dreadbrood were not attacking, they were going to take the fight into Rirea. They were going to die for their children. Marikoth, of course, had told them that they must advance or the children would die one at a time. He wondered if Marikoth could speak to them telepathically.

“Thalanil, can you bring up the Wall?” Rohan asked.

“Not in time,” Thalanil answered. “And not from here. Besides, I can either locate Marikoth or put up the Wall. Not both.”

Those were the first words he’d spoken since he had started to look for Finn’s uncle. His father had his eyes shut and his hands rested on his thighs, palms up, thumbs and middle fingers touching.

“Then no Wall,” Rohan breathed out. “We can’t keep them in the old Empire.”

Finn saw the pain in Rohan’s eyes. His beloved already saw the Fae as “his people” and every bone in Rohan’s body likely told him to protect them. But they couldn’t. Like Silver Soul had said, Marikoth had a blade to those parents’ throats.

“If the Dreadbrood don’t fight them at the border, Rohan, the Fae will push further forward into Rirea and attack our people there,” Finn warned. “They will be in Dawnmore within a few hours, if not less. It will be a slaughter of innocents if we don’t stop them here. Marikoth has likely told them to spare no one. Steel is nothing against magic.”

“I know,” Rohan let out a breath, but his eyes still had a wild hope. “Can you–can you drain them, Finn? Just enough to incapacitate them?”

Finn looked at Atheve. “I’m not certain I have that kind of fine control with this many people. Quite a few will simply be snuffed out in my initial pull. And the energy I would gain would be enormous. I could feed it to you, but you would have to disperse it into the power stone network. Otherwise, anyone we did manage to save would be destroyed by the magical blast, like that time in the forest.”

“I cannot access the power stone network without touching the main stone in the Remnant,” Rohan said with a shake of his head. “With the time currents and everything else, we can’t make it there.”

“We must go through with the original plan,” Thalanil said. “Marikoth has left us with no other choice.”

“I know,” Rohan breathed and his head lowered.

“The Dreadbrood are not known for their gentleness. They don’t hold back usually,” Finn reminded them both. “But I will do my best to command them to wound and not kill if at all possible.”

But even as he sent the command, Finn knew that was a vain hope. The desperation of the Fae would lead them to keep attacking even when wounded. The Dreadbrood would have to maim them or send them into unconsciousness for them to stop.

Marikoth, you bastard. You know that you’re going down. But you’re going to take as many

people with you as you can.

If any of those children die, Finrael, I fear the Fae will blame you, Silver Soul said sadly.

They will, Finn agreed. *So when the time comes, it must be me and me alone that confronts Marikoth. Father and Rohan must have clean hands. Better for them to think the evil Death's Chosen did it.*

Finrael, you are as much their leader as Rohan is, Silver Soul reminded him. *Taking the role of villain–*

If there must be one, it will be me, Finn cut her off. *They will love Rohan and fear me.*

The Dreadbrood began to march. Finn heard Tearlach's wild war cry above it all as he and his warriors rode into battle. Even if he could have reached Tearlach to let him know why the Fae were fighting, he wouldn't have done it. Tearlach–unlike the Dreadbrood–was mortal and could die. Having him pull his punches would simply put him in greater danger than he already was. And for as much as Finn felt the Fae were his people, Tearlach was his friend and family.

"Marikoth could not have gone far, could he? Could he have teleported all of the children away from here? There must be so many of them! Though how he got all those children to him in the first place in such a short time is amazing to me as well," Rohan said. "So perhaps I am thinking in too limited a way."

"Marikoth had people on father's council betray him. Each of them represents large swathes of the Empire. I am betting that they called their people to Aymar the moment that Marikoth arrived," Finn said bitterly. "To *celebrate* their new king."

Finn could imagine Marikoth pouring poison into their ears through the use of a Luminus or two or three or ten. Even with his growing hatred of his uncle, he knew that Marikoth could dazzle people. Not to mention that he was wickedly smart. Taking over the Empire likely had obsessed his every thought. It was only recently that the true extent of his sickness was showing and affecting him and those around him. Marikoth dressed all in white could have looked like a savior and not a skeleton to them.

"He convinced my parents to betray their friend," Rohan said with a grimace. "They were good people, but desperate. So I imagine he did the same with these Fae."

"Think of how bad the overgrowth is. They are practically prisoners in those villages we went to," Finn reminded him. "Hex and creatures like her have them sacrificing people just to stay alive. I think it's been very bad in the Empire for a very long time."

His gaze slid to his father. Thalanil's eyes were still shut. His father likely knew this as well. How long had his own people been plotting against him? Likely since before Rohan's parents died. The Wall had merely slowed Marikoth's plans down, but it hadn't stopped them.

As they were flying past the wyvern tower, Finn frowned and said, "I had a vision of defeating Marikoth. It was right on top of that tower. I wonder if he is nearer than we think."

It was then that his father's eyes opened and he let out a sharp laugh. "You are right, Finrael. He *is* here. We are just not seeing him."

His father's hands glowed red. He drew elaborate runes in the air, which burned red after his fingers had drawn the symbols. He then *pushed* those runes towards Aymar itself. The image of the palace rippled, almost as if they had been looking at a reflection of the palace in a still lake that his father had thrown a pebble into. The image *popped* out of existence.

The gardens and streets of Aymar had appeared empty when they had flown over them, but now Finn saw that they were filled, packed really, with people. These people were crammed in like sardines. But they were not running. In fact, they were all very, very still. And more than that, they all

looked to have glowing bands around their throats that were connected to what looked like long leashes. They reminded Finn of the life threads that he tugged on.

They are life threads, he realized with horror.

He followed these "leashes" and they all led to one place within the palace grounds. It was the garden where Marikoth had given him the dream of a life together as family. Marikoth stood amongst hundreds of children. He held one of them on his knee, his fingers playing in her hair. It took Finn a moment to recognize the crying child. It was Jani. The girl from Ryleth's village.

* * *

"KEEP RUNNING! KEEP RUNNING!" Leonid shouted at the backs of the others.

He was pulling up the rear as they dashed at full speed down the hallway to get back to the crypt. The undead were keeping up with them. He'd had to spin around and slash at them with his sword a few times. He'd almost been overwhelmed a time or two, but Serxio had grabbed his arm and yanked him free just as he was being pulled under.

As much as those experiences had made him want to dash even faster, Miles and Hannah could not run as quickly as he could. Their legs were shorter, and in Miles' case, the young man was simply not as fit. Serxio was keeping up despite making a fuss earlier, but still, he really had to get the foppish young lord on an exercise regime for situations just like these.

Let's hope we make it through this time before I start thinking of the next!

The doorway to the steps down to the crypt appeared ahead of them. Serxio gave out a moan of thankfulness. He put on a spurt of more speed and literally pushed the two young people ahead of him. Leonid chanced slashing behind himself blindly with the sword. It cut through a few dead throats, but though such a blow would have killed any living enemies, it didn't even slow the undead down. Their throats yawned open like second mouths, but they kept coming.

Leonid sped up as they reached the stairwell. He practically lifted Serxio and the children down the stairs.

"Undead! UNDEAD!" he screamed.

"We're under attack!" Serxio shouted.

"Help! Help!" Miles cried.

"Is it my fault? Did I do it? Hannah sobbed.

"No, dear girl, it was not your fault," Serxio said as they raced out of the stairwell.

The Guard along with Artremaya and Nafi's people already had their swords and crossbows out. They formed a half-moon around the bottom of the stairs. Hannah and Miles burst through their lines while Leonid and Serxio joined the Guard. Ryleth was suddenly by his side.

"Marikoth's undead?" she asked.

"Y-yes," Leonid got out. "So many. So many. Like a city's worth."

Christopher was suddenly by his other side. The young man said to Ryleth, "If the shield fails, fire is the best bet against them. I wish I had my potions!"

"There are too many to control, Christopher," Serxio said.

And he was proven right in a moment as the undead surged down the staircase. There was a green flash as the first one impacted the shield that Ryleth had set up. They piled up one on top of the other from the floor to the ceiling of the stairwell. Their rotting faces were crushed against the shield. It glowed a solid green as the pressure from the other undead pushing forward simply increased.

"How long before they give up?" Serxio asked.

"What do you mean?" Leonid asked as he rolled his shoulders back.

"I know they're not terribly smart, but Marikoth is. Couldn't he have commanded them to go elsewhere if there was a spot they couldn't get through?" Serxio asked.

The undead were being smashed against the sizzling shield. Ryleth was feeding more power into it. But from the flicker of her eyes, Leonid wondered if she was worried that this shield couldn't take this continued assault. It was to stop Marikoth from teleporting in, not to keep undead out.

"Are you worried about them finding the back way in here?" Christopher asked.

"No, that's protected by the hidden door," Serxio said. "I am more worried about them going up into the castle."

"No one's up there," Leonid said.

"Exactly, so they might go into the city," Serxio said. "I'm betting they were instructed to simply kill as many as they could. Cause chaos."

"So if we don't kill them here then they'll go after the citizens of Dawnmore?" Christopher asked with a grimace.

Serxio nodded. "They've all been ordered to stay inside their homes, but–"

"Wood doors are not going to keep them out," Leonid growled.

"Exactly," Serxio said. "The wolves are up there, but–"

"There are too many even for Tyreon and Skye," Leonid said.

"Hold on. I can see if they're starting to move that way," Christopher said and closed his eyes.

The young man fisted his hands and clenched his jaw. Leonid could almost feel his effort at whatever he was doing. He was completely silent for a moment. Only the sense of effort remained. But then he gasped and his eyes opened.

"We're all right," Christopher said, staggering slightly.

Leonid caught him to steady him. "What do you mean?"

"They aren't leaving the catacombs. I–I sent my own undead down to check," Christopher said and passed a shaky hand over his sweaty brow.

"You can see through their eyes, Christopher?" Ryleth looked utterly impressed.

"With–with great difficulty," Christopher admitted and suddenly pitched forward.

Leonid caught one arm while Serxio had the other. They dragged him over to a chair. He slumped into it, resting his head between his knees. Serxio kneeled beside him.

"What do you need? What can we do, Christopher?" Serxio asked as he rubbed the young man's leg.

"Nothing. Nothing. I'm all right. Or I will be. Going to have a massive headache though," Christopher grimaced. "But at least we know we have the undead's sole attention."

"Rest here, lad. You've done good," Leonid said after patting Christopher's shoulder.

He went back over to Ryleth. "Will the shield hold if we start firing through it?"

"For a time," she answered as her magic-limned hands moved and fed yet more power into the shield. "It won't last much longer even if you don't."

"This is a good choke point. Only a few can get through at a time and we can slow them down by clogging up the opening with their bodies." Leonid stroked his chin. "We should have the unarmed people go deeper into the Dreadbrood chamber. Maybe even by the back door. Just in case."

"Good idea, Leonid!" Serxio rose up from Christopher's side and lifted his voice, "Everyone! Everyone, listen up! All civilians should begin making their way to the rear exit!"

The people looked back at Serxio with terror in their eyes. As afraid as they were of the undead

that were trying to break in, many of them had seen or heard about what had happened to Ryleth and Thomas in the Dreadbrood tunnels.

"There's nothing to fear back there! The Dreadbrood are battling for us in the Empire!" Serxio cried. "But these undead are right here. You need to move. Move!"

Serxio was making sweeping motions with his hands towards the civilians, but though they began to bunch up against the back wall, none of them were leaving.

"What about those coffin-chamber things?" One of the scholars asked. "The Dreadbrood dragged her off before! Couldn't some still be there and do the same to us?"

There was a chorus of "yes! What about her?" The "she" and "her" that they were referring to was Ryleth just like he feared. Leonid grimaced. Yet more smashed faces were appearing against the shield that was flickering wildly. Ryleth was murmuring spells under her breath. A bead of sweat was making its way down her temple.

"LISTEN UP!" Leonid shouted, which had all the other voices raised about Ryleth's near-death experience quieting. "The moment this shield goes, all of those undead will spill into this room and they will go after you. We'll be overwhelmed. If we have to try and take care of you and ourselves, we will fail! You must go!"

He brandished his sword towards the back hallway.

"I–I will lead you!" It was Miles who spoke. With one hand, he held onto Hannah, while with the other, he grabbed a lantern. "We can do this. It's perfectly safe! We need to let the soldiers do their work."

"Miles, will you be all right?" Leonid asked.

The young man nodded. "I have my dagger still. It will be fine."

"Brave lad," Leonid said. "Christopher, you need to go with them. You're not fit to fight."

Christopher nodded weakly, but managed to stand and hobble over to Miles. The three of them began to make their way into the back tunnels. Slowly but surely the other people in the room began to follow after them except for Queen Artremaya and her people and King Nafi and his people, though the latter looked as if he wished to flee. Leonid watched until he saw the backs of the final people disappear down the hallway then he was turning back to the stairwell. The shield was sparking and flashing as the crush of undead continued.

"It won't hold much longer," Ryleth gritted out.

"All right, Guards! This is our moment to shine! This is *our* front line!" Leonid roared. "We protect those people with our lives!"

ENDGAME

Back in the Empire…

Marikoth was smiling at them. He actually *waved* and jiggled the child on his knee as if they were sitting for a portrait and a friend had dropped by. Rage rose in Rohan's throat. Marikoth was a monster!

"He is connected to all their lives," Finn murmured.

The young man's eyes were narrowed as he swept them across the sea of people in the garden and beyond. Rohan too saw the threads of life connecting to Marikoth. The children were nearest to him, but it wasn't just them that he had a line on. It was everyone in Aymar and the city beyond. A chill went through Rohan. How easy would it be for Marikoth to drain all of these people? If Finn attempted to drain him Marikoth would just draw on those other lives to sustain his own.

"What do you mean, Finrael?" Thalanil asked, clearly unable to see what they did

"There's an elaborate spell connecting Marikoth to every single person below us," Finn answered. "He's accomplished with a spell what I can do naturally. If I drain him, he drains them."

"Finn would have to kill everyone else before Marikoth would go down," Rohan cut to the chase.

The three of them were silent. Marikoth cocked his head to the side as if confused by the fact that they were not drawing near. A fireball ripped through the sky beside them from the Fae mages. Silver Soul easily banked to avoid it. The magic sputtered out a few feet away. It was unclear if it had been intentionally sent up or if it had been deflected. Rohan did not dare look over at the battlefield. The only way to end that was to end *this*.

"The longer we wait to attack Marikoth, the more Fae die," Finn said. "But the moment we attack Marikoth, the people down below die."

"My brother always understood people's weaknesses. He used to tell me that it was dangerous for a good person to be a ruler," Thalanil muttered. "Because they wouldn't have the stomach to do what must be done."

"Hugues said something similar," Rohan admitted bitterly.

"Yes, they both have much in common. Very practical men. Strategic in their thinking," Thalanil agreed.

"But they both lost," Rohan pointed out. "My uncle never won Maeve's love and his advice helped kill my parents. Your brother is on the edge of death. He might have sat on the throne, but he will never be king."

"He looks wasted," Thalanil murmured with a touch of horror in his voice. "Like a skeleton walking. Good gods."

"To put together this spell and that convincing illusion must have cost him plenty of power," Finn

agreed. “I don’t think he’ll be able to resist draining those people whether we attack or not. The curse is progressing so fast now. So fast.”

“Where should we land?” Rohan looked over the side of Silver Soul for a place large enough to accommodate the wyvern. “We need to confront him and… end this.”

Finn suddenly gripped his arm. Rohan turned towards him. Finn’s black eyes were filled with an emotion that he couldn’t read.

“You can’t be a part of this,” Finn said with a certainty that chilled Rohan.

“Part of what?” Rohan began.

“Some of those people are going to die. Maybe more than just some. Children are going to die,” Finn emphasized and shook Rohan’s arm.

Rohan’s heart sank into his feet at Finn’s words. Finn did not say something unless he believed it to be true. But even as he looked out at all of those anxious faces of the citizenry below–staring up at them with a mixture of hope and fear–he knew that Finn was right. Unless there was a miracle, he didn’t think that any of them could move fast enough to stop Marikoth from stealing many of those lives.

“Finrael, you are not a monster!” Thalanil cried. “You do not need to be the one to take on the burden of what Marikoth has wrought here! I will be with you. Rohan will be with you. We fight together!”

“I am Death’s Chosen, Father,” Finn pronounced and his head lifted slightly.

“Still not a monster!” Rohan shook his head.

“No, but I am Death’s representative.” Finn’s gaze was focused into the distance as if seeing the future. “One of us needs to be seen as having clean hands in this. I will always be viewed with suspicion and fear on some level. That is beyond question. So it must be you, Rohan. You must not be anywhere near Marikoth when I end him so that you are not tainted by what I must do.”

“Tainted? You see yourself as–”

“In the end, it will be my call when to attack Marikoth,” Finn lowered his head. The wind blew his white hair across his forehead. He looked more beautiful than Rohan had ever seen him. A study in black and white. “When others wonder if there could have been another way to finish Marikoth and save everyone, they will blame me. Not you. Not so long as you stay out of it.”

“Finn, I am their king, too. And we are in this together,” Rohan told him.

“I do not need you, Rohan,” Finn said firmly. “Not to do this. In fact, you will distract me from what I must do.”

Finn’s words stabbed him. But he understood what Finn was saying. Having him and Thalanil there would just give Marikoth two more people to drain. If they were away, Finn could concentrate.

“That would only be true if Marikoth couldn’t come after us,” Rohan said, his voice rough. “What happens when you are down there and he teleports up here? You’ve only used the teleportation gift a few times. How accurate can you be? Accurate enough to get on the back of a moving wyvern?”

Finn’s expression crumpled. “I–”

“He knows that if he lets you get close to him that it’s all over. He will make sure you can’t,” Rohan said. “Look at what he’s done.” He swept a hand at the fighting Fae mages and the trapped people. “He’s anticipated every move we would make. Sending us away is *exactly* what he thinks you will do. So you must out think him. And your original plan of us being together does this.”

Finn swallowed. “You’re–you’re right. I just…” Finn cupped his cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Rohan said back, taking that hand and kissing it over and over again. “Now, let’s do this. Thalanil, how close can you get us to him?”

"I do not think we should teleport down near him. He would anticipate we do this and will have something nasty planned," Thalanil said, his brow furrowing as he studied the packed gardens.

"There is an opening there." Rohan pointed to a place near the door that they had accessed Thalanil's gardens through the first time they had met him. "If we can jump from Silver Soul's back again–"

"We can. Let us go," Finn said and Silver Soul unerringly flew them towards the spot.

She couldn't get them much lower than 30 feet above the ground. But this time they had come equipped with ropes. They would not risk magic against Marikoth unless they had to. With grace, Finn and Thalanil were over the sides. Rohan was the last to slide down the rope. He had to drop the last five feet. He landed in a crouch. The two Ravenspars were already standing straight.

The garden was so thick with children that as they moved towards Marikoth, the children had to press against one another to form a slender path. As they passed, the children let out small sounds of fear. But quite a few of them looked at the three of them with hope, too. Rohan tried to keep a gentle smile on his lips as he greeted them and showed nothing of the rage and anguish he felt. Thalanil murmured soothing words. Finn stared straight ahead as he likely thought that his black eyes would frighten them.

"I think that's close enough," Marikoth said in his musical voice that no longer fit the creature he resembled.

They stopped about ten feet from him. Finn stood between Thalanil and Rohan. Jani stared at them with huge wet eyes. There were tear tracks on her face. She mouthed Rohan and Finn's names, but no sound came out. She either was too terrified or exhausted by such terror to speak. But it split Rohan's heart in two.

"Do you think you're safe from me there, Marikoth?" Finn's voice was soft.

"Oh, I think so!" Marikoth laughed. "Unless you intend to kill all these children. And not just them! I'm sure you saw how many people I am connected to on your way in."

Finn said nothing. He studied Marikoth with those black eyes and seemed implacable like a statue of Death incarnate.

"That's quite the outfit, nephew! I dare say… and the *eyes*! My goodness, I thought you were trying to pretend to be all helpless and sweet, but this is all quite *edgy*" Marikoth chuckled, but there was unease in it. "Do you find him attractive this way, Rohan? He looks rather monstrous!"

"Have you seen yourself in the mirror lately, Marikoth?" Rohan asked.

"Ouch!" Marikoth's free hand fluttered to his face, which was so drawn that it looked more like a bare skull. "You should be more careful of my feelings, Rohan! Or I might do something *unfortunate* to restore my beauty."

His left hand was fastened around the back of Jani's neck. He squeezed it and took a bit of her life. His red eyes flared with a hungry light. His tongue licked his lips afterwards as if he was a starving man.

"You think any amount of life can restore you back to yourself?" Thalanil asked. "Marikoth, it is *over*. You are dying and there is nothing that can pull you back from the brink."

Marikoth glared at Thalanil. His shadowed eyes blazed and his lips writhed back from teeth that looked more like fangs.

"What do you know, brother?" Marikoth snapped.

"I know death when I see it," Thalanil answered.

"Do you? Then you must know that you'll have to kill every Fae mage out there to stop them from burning their way through Rirea and beyond. They have orders to kill every single person they meet.

Civilian or soldier. Adult or child. Grandmother or infant," Marikoth boasted. "For if they don't…"

His skeletal fingers clenched around Jani's throat and she moaned in pain and terror. Rohan must have made some move, however small, but Marikoth caught it.

"You can come to me, dear Rohan! In fact, if you like, you can sit on my lap and I'll let her go! Do you want me to let Jani go?" Marikoth offered and actually pushed Jani off from his knee so that she was standing on two wobbly legs before him, though he still kept a hold of the back of her neck.

Rohan desperately wanted to do something! He thought of being so close to Marikoth that he could shove Lightbringer through Marikoth's chest. But then he remembered how he hadn't been able to move a muscle last time he was so near the Death Mage. Offering himself for Jani wouldn't help things. It would only make things worse. His eyes lowered in shame though as Marikoth drained her some more and she collapsed to her knees.

"Stop it, Marikoth!" Rohan snarled.

"What's wrong, Rohan? Surely, you aren't afraid to come by me? You won't let someone suffer that you could save, would you?" Marikoth cooed.

"Stop!" Rohan roared back.

"But I'm only doing this because you won't come to me!" Marikoth shook Jani like a rag doll running out of sand. "You're the one who needs to stop. Not me. You! All of this is *your* fault. If you had just understood that we are meant to be together none of this would have happened. None of it! Every death is on *your* head!"

Rohan knew this wasn't true. But the anguish of hearing Jani's screams and being able to do *nothing* would stay marked upon his soul forever.

"I'll give you some energy!" Rohan shouted.

"Rohan, no!" Thalanil cried.

"I have no choice," Rohan told him

"You should not do this." Thalanil shook his head. "This is a war…"

But not even the Fae king could conjure the words they both knew should come after that. In a war, there were *casualties*. Jani was one of those. But Rohan couldn't bear it. And Finn said nothing. His eyes were fixed on Marikoth. Did Finn approve of this? Did he think it was a good idea? There was the barest brush of Finn's fingers on the back of his nearest hand.

He wants me to do it. He has a plan.

"You'll *give* me energy, Rohan?" Marikoth paused in his torture of the child.

Another brush of Finn's fingers and Rohan was saying, "I will. Just let Jani go."

* * *

Back in Rirea…

"What can I and my people do?" Artremaya asked Leonid.

"Yes, what is your plan?" Nafi asked, looking harassed and afraid.

Leonid looked the short monarch up and down. "To be honest, your majesty, I think you should head back with the others. You don't look much like a fighter."

"And not be present for this battle and potential victory? How do you think it will play if I'm the only monarch that runs away?" Nafi asked.

"Like someone who doesn't want to get in the way," Hugues said dryly. He stepped up with a sword in one hand and a crossbow in the other. "But I understand if you want to make your last stand

here."

Nafi stretched out a hand to one of his soldiers and he was given a bow and quiver of arrows. "Your memory must be failing, Hugues, if you can't recall I'm one of the best shots in Bolan!"

"That was a long time ago," Hugues said. "But I do recall it."

"I wiped the field just last year in the competition. Surely, I can handle some shuffling dead," Nafi sniffed. "Besides, better to die fighting than curled in a hole."

"That's the first thing you've said that I agree with," Artremaya responded.

"You think I'm a fussy old man who has gotten soft," Nafi guessed, but didn't sound annoyed by it.

"I don't know you, King Nafi," Artremaya said neutrally.

"Well, let us rectify that today. We will know one another as comrades in combat," Nafi said as he expertly nocked an arrow with a practiced motion. "So what is the plan, Leonid?"

Leonid lifted an eyebrow. "All right then. We're all in this together. Once the shield fails, we need to keep that stairwell jammed with undead bodies to stop the flow of the ones behind them. Fire works best against them. They go up like dry tinder even if they look *wet*."

"I can set arrows aflame," Ryleth offered even as sweat poured down her face from the drain of keeping the shield functioning.

"You're doing enough, Ryleth! You haven't had any time to recover from yesterday," Serxio protested.

Ryleth laughed. "What? This? It's a relaxing day in Reave Castle in comparison to the others! At least, that's been my experience."

"I assure you that it's normally not this exciting," Leonid gave out a huff of laughter as he said it.

"I don't know if I believe you, Leonid. For it seems to me that it is never boring with you and Serxio," Ryleth laughed.

"These two always get into trouble," Hugues said with a smile. "Good trouble, but I always knew if I found them together with Rohan that something would be a foot."

The shield let out a great flash of green.

"The shield is almost done," Ryleth warned unnecessarily.

Artremaya and Nafi had their people array themselves in the semi-circle of soldiers around the stairwell. They took their places on either side of Leonid and Serxio with Ryleth and Hugues in the middle between them.

"Remember, we need to slow them down–"

Leonid did not get a chance to finish that statement because the shield failed. Like a cork out of a bottle of champagne that had been shaken, the undead burst through the suddenly open stairwell opening in a flood of bodies. The undead flew into the room, end over end, finally falling in heaps on the floor. The mass of undead behind them started to stream in, climbing over their brethren's fallen bodies.

Ryleth sent out a stream of fire that set the undead aflame. The fire spread amongst their fellows until it looked like a raging furnace ahead of them. Arrows whizzed through the air finding targets, but the undead were unphased by arrows that stuck out of their eye sockets or through their throats.

"Go for the limbs!" Leonid shouted, but ended up coughing as the smoke from the burning corpses stung his throat.

He surged forward, swinging his sword to sever limbs or heads. The undead moved like a mass of fire towards all of them. He saw Serxio cleaving off a flaming skull while dodging the burning hands of another undead. Nafi had sent three bolts through an undead's head, cutting it from the body. His hands were surprisingly steady as he nocked another arrow and another. Hugues had one undead

on the ground, holding it there with a booted foot while he cleaved its head off. Artremaya had two curved blades in both hands. She dove forward, cutting off limbs and rolling out of the reach of the undead. Ryleth conjured shields to hold the flow of undead off and sent more fireballs towards the oncoming horde.

But even as bravery and skill were shown by every single one of the people on their side, the undead kept coming.

And coming.

And coming.

Soon, they were retreating up the steps to the tombs of the last Aeturnal and his Bonded One as the undead spread out like an ever expanding pool of water. Out of the corner of his eye, Leonid saw a dozen soldiers go down under a wave of flaming undead. Their choked cries were cut off all too soon.

"I'm out of arrows!" Nafi shouted.

The King of Bolan had a sword out and was slashing and stabbing at five undead that surrounded him. Soon, he too was out of sight. Artremaya was screaming as her hair was grabbed by some of the undead while others started to rip at her throat with their rotting fingernails. Hugues was backed against a bookcase, unable to move away from the wave of undead. His face was cut in a dozen places. Sweat coated his skin, but he kept fighting until his sword arm was pinned and the undead started to bite his flesh.

"Serxio, Hugues is nearly down!" Leonid shouted.

Serxio was right beside him. His best friend spun like a whirling dervish, striking so fast that he was a blur, but he was facing a wall of undead. One of them toppled on top of Serxio. Leonid let out a shout of horror as Serxio was covered in a blanket of the undead. He reached into the pile, searching for Serxio, but he was pulled down instead. He felt teeth at his ear.

We're not going to make it, he thought. *We're not…*

* * *

Back in the Empire…

"Release Jani and I will feed you," Rohan said. "I can even do it from here. I do not need to touch you, Marikoth."

"Oh? Well, what if I *want* you to touch me?" Marikoth fluttered his lashes at Rohan. But his hunger must have overcome his urge to bargain, because he suddenly shoved Jani towards him. Raw starvation was written large in his eyes. "Do it, Rohan! If you don't, I have plenty more innocents to drain!"

"I will."

Rohan grabbed Jani and held her close. He used his magic to restore her. Jani wobbled, but then looked up at him with relief in her eyes.

"Rohan," she said sweetly.

He smoothed a hand over her head. "Everything is going to be all right."

But is it? What is Finn thinking? Now that Jani is clear, he might… might act at any moment. And there will be so many dead.

Rohan pushed Jani quickly behind him and faced Marikoth. He had fueled Lightbringer many times without touching it. While touching an object or person made it easier for him to spread the

magic, it wasn't necessary. So if he thought of Marikoth as one of the enchanted weapons, he should be able to do it. He could not imagine actually *touching* Marikoth now.

"I'm waiting, Rohan," Marikoth's voice was filled with such desperate longing that it was hard to listen to.

"One moment," Rohan said.

He cast one sidelong glance at Finn. His beloved was still watching and saying nothing. But the touches–so brief–told him that Finn wanted him to do this. So Rohan reached out with his magic towards Marikoth.

"Dear nephew, you are rather quiet! I'm surprised you're not squawking about me being satisfied by your lover!" Marikoth laughed wildly.

"Nothing will satisfy you, Marikoth," Finn said quietly. "Rohan is not the balm to your rotten soul that you think he is."

"We're meant to be together! Not you and him! Me and him! Ruling together! You'll see!" Marikoth growled.

Finn did not respond. His expression was almost neutral.

Rohan touched Marikoth's magical self and he immediately sensed how broken Marikoth was. The curse had eaten away at the Death Mage's core. When he had restored Thalanil, even when the Fae king had been near death, his soul had not been like this. Moth-eaten. Shredded. Held together by only the thinnest threads.

Cut those strings and he will be gone.

"I'm waiting, dearest! Don't let me wait any longer," Marikoth demanded, his voice harsh.

Rohan sent a thin thread of power into that worn soul. It was like sending it into a black hole. There was nothing to hold his power. It just passed through Marikoth like he was a tattered spiderweb.

"I'm waiting!" Marikoth screeched.

"I am sending you power," Rohan told him.

For one tense moment, Marikoth stared at him unbelievingly, but then terror crept into those mad red eyes.

"You're not sending me any!" Marikoth cried.

"But I *am*. There's nothing… nothing to hold it any longer," Rohan explained as he stopped sharing the power. "There's nothing left… to you."

"You're just doing it wrong!" Marikoth tossed his head back and laughed. "Let me show you, Rohan."

And then Marikoth moved towards him, forgetting that by getting near Rohan, he was coming near *Finn*. Maddened by hunger and afraid that Rohan was telling the truth, Marikoth stormed right up to him, one hand outstretched to touch his chest and drain his life.

Except he wasn't there anymore.

Finn had neatly stepped between them. Marikoth was touching someone. But it was Finn. Marikoth's expression went wild as he realized his mistake. He tried to wrench his hand away, but Finn clamped his hand over Marikoth's. The Death Mage could not pull away.

"If you drain me, you drain them!" Marikoth shouted.

"Actually, no, because I realized *how* you connected their life forces to yours. It's just like how you did the undead," Finn said quietly. "And I learned how to sever those connections, Marikoth."

Rohan saw the threads that had bound Marikoth to the people were *cut*. Marikoth shuddered. He stared into Finn's eyes without blinking. Finn had all of the threads in his hands.

"What will you do with them?" Marikoth whispered. "Oh, God of Death, what will you do with all those lives?"

A raven's shadow–massive and black as pitch–covered the garden. Thalanil looked up even as Rohan could not look away from Finn and Marikoth.

"By the gods," Thalanil whispered.

"What will you do with all those lives, God of Death?" Marikoth repeated.

Rohan could only see the back of Finn's head. But he had no doubts about Finn's goodness. So when Finn effortlessly let the threads drop and freed every single person, he couldn't help but smile. Marikoth, though, let out a thin cry as he realized that he would never drain those lives.

"Are you going to–to kill me now, Finrael?" Marikoth asked.

"Yes," Finn answered. "But not here. You've harmed these people enough."

"Finrael, where do you wish to go? I will take you," Thalanil offered.

"There's no need," Finn assured him. "You and Rohan need to see to the people. This last part's… all me."

Then Finn and Marikoth disappeared. Teleporting away.

"Where did they go?" Rohan asked.

Thalanil pointed to the top of the wyvern tower. "There."

* * *

FINN STARED down at Marikoth's prone body. His uncle's breathing was shallow. He could see the bone through the skin. His red eyes were still focused upon Finn. This was the moment that Finn had seen or imagined. Either way, it was coming true. Silver Soul landed heavily behind them.

To have such a creature born of my queen! Silver Soul sounded disgusted.

Yes, but not all this is his fault. The curse is heavy upon him. He used to be someone else, Finn reminded her. *He once loved and was loved.*

This weakness was always in him, she disagreed. *Your Dreadbrood did well, Finrael. They subdued many of the Fae and killed only when they had to.*

That is good, Finn said with a touch of relief. And then he asked another critical question, *And Tearlach and his people?*

Death will have to come to drag that man off itself, Silver Soul huffed. *He will live forever despite his desire to ride into the thick of battle. They captured their fair share of our enemies when they realized what the game really was.*

Good. I'm glad. He is a friend and family, Finn said.

"Aren't you–aren't you going to get it over with, nephew?" Marikoth gasped out.

"Yes, uncle," Finn said. "It is time to end the pain you cause and the pain you're in."

Marikoth's eyelids fluttered shut for a moment before he refocused on Finn. "I won't–won't thank you. I should have won. But the gods don't play fair."

Finn smiled sadly. "Goodbye, uncle."

It took only the faintest of pulls before Marikoth's eyes went unfocused then they emptied of all life. His body became as white as bleached bone before breaking up into fine white particles and drifting away on the breeze.

* * *

Back in Rirea…

Leonid was screaming and fighting as he expected to feel those teeth bite into his flesh.

Except it didn't happen.

The undead started to topple all around him. They fell where they stood. Some of them fell on top of him. He let out a disgusted sound as he shoved them off. When a hand grabbed him, he let out another shout, but then he realized that it was Serxio. He yanked with all his might until both of them were free of the pile of undead. The two of them gazed around at the burning corpses that were no longer animated.

He met Hugues' eyes as the lord pushed the corpses, whichhad collapsed against him and the bookshelf, off. Artremaya struggled to get out from under half a dozen corpses. Nafi dragged himself up using the edge of one of the sarcophagi and breathed shakily. Ryleth started dousing the flaming undead with a water spell. She was trembling but continued the spell regardless.

"What–what happened?" Serxio asked.

Leonid let out a laugh. "I think–no, I *know* that we won."

"We won?" Serxio blinked.

Leonid grabbed Serxio and hugged him. "Yes, Serxio, we won!"

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

One year later…

REAVE CASTLE WAS a hive of activity. And not just the castle. Dawnmore was abuzz as the wedding day dawned. Aymar was in a tizzy, too, as every Fae luxury was passing between the palace and the castle with ever increasing pace as the wedding hour neared. In fact, every single corner of the renewed Empire of the Eclipse Throne was involved in the planning or supplying of the wedding of King Finrael Ashton Ravenspar and King Rohan De Clare Aeturnal.

The wedding itself would take place in the new Grand Hall of Reave Castle, which was large enough to hold 1,000 people. The ancient castle had been given the makeover of makeovers. It had been Rohan's test subject for his ever-growing magic powers. The structure was now twice the size it had been, but still it wasn't large enough for the crowd of guests expected at this wedding of the century, or maybe centuries was better, or maybe even millennia. No one expected it to be ever outdone, because the two rulers of the Empire, the saviors of the realm, the beloved Rohan and Finn, were getting married. Aeturnal and Death's Chosen would join legally together just as they already ruled spiritually together over a renewed Empire.

Finn looked down from Silver Soul's back at the road between Tanglewood and Dawnmore. It was no less crowded than the one from Aymar or the seaports where the goods from Bolan and Sultane were streaming in to feed, clothe and entertain the people coming to the wedding or simply wishing to be near the festivities.

There were countless carts, horses and people making their way towards the city. One cart had lost a wheel and was holding up the line. The driver was being shouted at by another cartsman who had barrels of beer and wine precariously tottering in the back of his cart. Some teenagers were sneaking around the back to catch a few drops that might just spill out. Finn reached down with his magic and lifted the broken cart while slotting the new wheel in. The men's heads shot up as the shadow of the wyvern passed overhead and their problem was solved.

"Thank you, King Ravenspar!" he heard as the shouting turned to delighted laughter.

Finn smiled and waved down at the men. His and Silver Soul's presence–along with the use of magic–was something that the locals had long gotten used to. While he still adored riding Sweetfire, there was no better way to see the Empire than on the back of a wyvern.

The men were now helping one another get underway. The teenagers were being shooed away from the alcohol. Soon traffic was gliding along the white, curling ribbon of road that cut through

green fields.

Finn drew in a deep breath of the sweet, fragrant air. It was high summer and the fields were full to overflowing with produce and grain. The fruit trees were spangled with flowers, indicating that the fall would have a heavy harvest of fruit that could be eaten, dried, stored or turned into ciders or vinegars. His mouth watered at the thought of crisp apple cider that would leave his head buzzing pleasantly. They hadn't had apples in Rirea for… Well, he couldn't remember when. But they would have them this year.

And every year.

The wind stirred the fields of grain that were so tall that that they towered above the farmers' heads. People were out harvesting tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers, radishes, corn and more as the season looked to produce *multiple* harvests and not just one.

Finn could still remember how the fields had been gray and dead last season. But now? Now there was a bounty that he and Rohan hadn't hoped would return to the realm for a decade. But the rebalancing of life–the restoration of the power stone network had been mostly completed–had almost immediately shown results. It was as if the land had just been waiting to burst forth with food and flowers and they had just uncorked the bottle.

And it wasn't just here.

No longer did the villages of the old remnant Empire like Tradavor need magical fences and Fae mages to guard their high walls from rogue and dangerous plant and animal life. The walls had been torn down. People walked without fear alone into the forests to hunt and gather or simply sit beneath the glowing mushrooms and read a book.

There were still dangerous creatures like Hex, but they stayed in certain areas. And so long as they were left alone, they mostly left the imperial citizens alone. There would always be foolish individuals that would wander too far off the path or the creatures that would stalk prey too near a settlement, but that was normal and could be dealt with easily for sanity had come to the entire Empire.

For example, the Ostils were now taking root all over the Empire from where Finn had destroyed the land at Aymar to Dawnmore's public square and beyond. Now there were pretty glades all over the land where people found peace and shade and Ostil branches kept them safe.

Finn only had to cast his glance over at the Lupine Woods to see how vast and deep the changes were. The trees no longer weeped poison, but grew tall and strong. Their deep green canopy still covered the tracks of wolves, but also other game like deer, beavers, birds, and many other creatures, large and small. A few giant mushrooms had also appeared in the woods and made spots in them glow purple, blue, green and violet at night.

Even the Remnant had recovered. The tower was now completely obscured by the canopy of trees. The tree with leaves made of glass had come back to life. The massive power stone that was embraced by its roots glowed like a small sun now. And the time currents… Well, just as Rohan had theorized, they now flowed evenly over the Empire and gentled mortality's race to the finish line. It was estimated that human lifespans might be doubled.

He and Rohan had promised to fix the blight and the land had answered. They had cautioned their new subjects that it would take time and to be patient. But already everywhere was lush, verdant and peaceful.

Peaceful? Not back at the castle it likely isn't. Your father is, undoubtedly, pacing the floorboards with you being missing today of all days, Silver Soul chided him.

It was not the first time she had said this. When he'd come to her that morning with his hood up

and a mischievous smile on his lips, she'd warned him that going out on the day of the wedding was a mistake. There was so much for him to do. He had to get ready, didn't he? So many people wanted to see him and wish him well before the big event. But he'd convinced her to spread her wings regardless.

I needed to get the wine from Tanglewood, Finn reminded her. *I promised Rohan that we would have it at the feast table.*

With the amount of wine already going to be present at this wedding, would he really have missed it? Silver Soul pointed out dryly.

These bottles were laid down by my grandfather on my mother's side. Father is very fond of the wine, too. He and mother drank it the year before my birth. Finn patted the saddlebags that were carefully filled with dusty bottles of the old vintage. *The next wine to be made at Tanglewood won't be ready for a few years yet.*

This has nothing to do with wine! I know that you are more than eager to wed Rohan, so why are you avoiding getting ready for the big event? Silver Soul asked.

I'm not!

Really? You could not have had Jacob go get the wine? Or Magna? Or even Emmott? So long as Emmott got to ride in a carriage, he would have been glad to go. Though the wine would have likely been drunk before he got it back so there is that, she mused. *Still, there were others who could have done this task instead of you.*

I missed our morning ride, he said mulishly.

Finrael Ashton Ravenspar–

All right! It's because I don't want it to be over, Finn admitted. *When Rohan and I haven't been restoring the Empire, we've been planning this day. And the faster I get ready, the faster it will be done. I want to relish it.*

An immortal that understands the fleetingness of time! How rare! Silver Soul sounded amused. *But you should also remember that avoiding beginning something doesn't mean the end will come later. The end comes when it comes.*

I suppose so, Finn sighed.

But there's always your anniversaries, plus the anniversaries of your restoration of the Empire and your reign, plus your birthdays, plus–

You mean that there's no end to the celebrations we can have? Finn laughed.

You're the king. You can get married every year if you like. I don't think anyone would object, Silver Soul reminded him.

Finn grinned. *It is definitely an excuse to have everyone together. Artremaya and Nafi arrived last evening. Nafi brought so many clothes and jewels it's like he's moving in.*

You restored his reign, vanquished his enemies, and set Bolan on a brilliant course. And he only took half the credit for it, Silver Soul replied dryly. *Though his tales of the Battle of the Crypt make it seem that he, alone, stood against the horde of the undead and kept everyone safe.*

Finn grinned. *Yes, he has a very interesting take on that incident. I had Head Librarian Crosley take down the real accounts from Serxio, Leonid, Artremaya and Ryleth. Otherwise, our history would have been a fiction.*

Nafi had come around though to the desire for one Empire as Silver Soul had pointed out. It had just taken a bit of persuasion and some bribery.

"Even if I agreed that the treaty contemplates the full restoration of the Empire under Finrael and Rohan, Hugues, I am not certain it will do you much good," Nafi had admitted the night after Marikoth

was slain. “My enemies are numerous. They have poisoned the folk against me much as Marikoth did to Thalanil. A leaf drops and I am to blame!”

“So you are telling us that we are speaking to the wrong person?” Hugues had lifted an eyebrow even as he’d refilled Nafi’s wine glass and his own. There had been much drinking that night.

“Not in the least! I am the *only* one who would be interested in what the treaty says or making any alliances. Have Isdor or Vrokar be named King of Bolan and you will have to take the Dreadbrood there and conquer the place,” Nafi said as he quaffed his wine.

“So what you’re saying is that we must keep you in power to avoid another war?” Hugues lifted an eyebrow.

“The gods must favor me once again.” Nafi turned meaningfully towards Finn.

Finn’s outfit had not disappeared. Perhaps because it was not midnight yet, but his eyes were once more green. The raven sat on his shoulder. It kept wanting to stick its beak in his cup. Even when Finn had gotten the creature its own cup and filled it with wine, it still wanted to drink from his. It fixed its eyes upon Nafi now.

“You would have to do something else to gain the God of Death’s favor other than simply agree to what your kingdom already has in writing,” Finn remarked dryly as he tapped the treaty that sat between them on the table.

“And what would that be?” Nafi asked, his gaze following the bird’s movements.

“A temple must be raised.” Finn pulled out one of the maps of Bolan that Hugues had gotten out. He put his finger down on the map without looking. He knew it would land on the right spot. “Here.”

Hugues and Nafi looked down. Finn had marked a point in the center of a park in the capital city of Ruvia.

“That’s where we’ve had the most blight,” Nafi murmured, stroking his cheek. “A grand tree there died some time ago. Too large to take down. Whatever killed it seems to be spreading, too.”

“You need not worry about that. Build the temple according to the plans I give you and you will have a god’s favor. Spread the word of this god and you may get more,” Finn pointed out as the raven again tried to steal his wine.

“Well, I…” Nafi tugged at the collar of his robes.

“I assure you that the benefits are great. For all who are mortal must die. Acknowledging that fact and the benefit of it is not some evil thing,” Finn pushed.

“Besides, Nafi, I’m sure that even if Isdor or Vrokar cannot be reasoned with, are you telling us there’s *no one* who couldn’t be? No one who wouldn’t eagerly put up a temple and more to be King of Bolan and one of the leaders of the Empire?” Hugues asked as he sipped his wine contemplatively.

Nafi grunted. “Fine, but it better be an *attractive* temple. Not all black and grim!”

The raven let out a *caw*! Nafi nearly jumped from his seat. But despite his misgivings in the beginning, his alliance with the God of Death had gone well for Nafi. Rohan had made the True Stone shine once more. Isdor and Vrokar had found death at the hands of their own followers. As the land started to be restored and the value of trade started to be seen, Nafi’s stature as a king of action and bringer of riches grew. He became more popular than he ever had been before.

The temple *was* black, but the God of Death had allowed Nafi to adorn it with brightly colored silks, candles and pillows. Surprisingly, Nafi went there almost every day to meditate on the nephew he had lost. Many others joined him. They prayed to the God of Death that their lost loved ones had found peace and that they might see them again. Finn had even seen a set of black beads with a silver raven charm that Nafi carried as a symbol of his newfound faith. And Nafi had informed him that

more temples to the God of Death were being built in every major city. He wasn't alone in this.

Finn caught sight of Tearlach and six of his warriors riding back to the castle through the fields. He had arrived a week ago and went out hunting every morning. The all-black outfits the Achuviens wore were now adorned with a white raven. In Tearlach's case, the raven design was on the long cloak he wore. It flowed out behind him, fluttering in the wind like a living thing. The Achuvien king lifted his head as the shadow of the wyvern passed beside him. He waved at Finn. Finn grinned and waved back.

See, Silver Soul? I am not the only one that needed to get out and about on the big day. Tearlach is almost as invested in the wedding as Rohan and I are! Finn laughed.

We must fly to Achuvia. I did so enjoy the mountains there. And I imagine that you would like to check on the Dreadbrood in their mountain home, yes? Silver Soul asked.

They are fine, Finn assured her. *I feel them just as keenly there as I do when they are here. But we should go to Achuvia with the fall harvest.*

Just as they had agreed, the Dreadbrood were being stored in Achuvia. The raven had led Finn to a secret mountain entrance that led into a deep chamber where it was clear the Dreadbrood had long ago resided. There were carvings of the Necromancer on the interior walls, but also of him and Rohan.

"That is Marikoth!" Tearlach had exclaimed as they'd seen an unmistakable image of the Death Mage.

"So it was all foretold then," Rohan sighed. "From the very beginning."

"Amazing," Finn said with a shake of his head. He turned to Tearlach. "Thank you for allowing me to bring them home."

Tearlach nodded, hands on his armored hips, as he surveyed the quiet Dreadbrood. "I will make sure that none disturb them until they are needed once more."

"And we will make sure that Achuvia is forever rewarded for offering the Dreadbrood sanctuary once more," Finn assured him.

And they had kept their promise. While it had taken until this summer for Rirea to be restored, food had flowed into Achuvia from the rest of the Empire immediately after Marikoth's demise. The fall harvest, however, would be the first time that Rirea could show its support.

You're right, Silver Soul. There is so much to look forward to. Let's get this day really started, Finn said.

Then let us get home!

They soared towards Reave Castle. There were two wyvern towers. One of them was all for Silver Soul. A queen had to have her privacy, and it allowed her to sprawl out to sun her scales. It was the largest, highest tower that they flew. Finn couldn't wait to see Rohan and all of his friends. Today was a day without peer. It would be brilliant. It would be forever.

* * *

ROHAN LOOKED at the massive multi-drawer jewelry boxes that Sylmare Uridithas, Lady High Treasurer, had brought from Aymar. Each drawer she opened contained a dozen more crowns.

"When you asked me to find all of the Aeturnal crowns, I couldn't wait to see what I could find!" She beamed at him. "These are only a selection of the very best and I'm not even sure we found them all, but–"

"These aren't even *all* of them?" Rohan shook his head in wonder.

"You are a builder, King Rohan," Sylmare enthused. "Think of how many buildings and other structures you will add to the Empire. My understanding is that some of the Aeturnals specialized in jewelry and some were even so specific as to work only on crowns."

She's right. I now have an eternity to build.

"They're all so beautiful," Rohan breathed as his fingers brushed over priceless diamonds, flawless emeralds, and glittering rubies.

Most of the crowns were made of metal. Silver, gold, platinum or a mixture. Others incorporated bone or even stone in them. Each was unique and according to Sylmare they all had names at one point.

"But I'm afraid that, unlike Vudine, theirs are lost to the tides of time," she said softly. "Their names might have given us an idea of what enchantment each crown possesses."

"Oh, I don't need their names, Lady Sylmare. I can tell what they are enchanted to do just by touching them," Rohan told her. "This one," he lifted up a silver circlet set with the largest diamond he'd ever seen and explained, "allows the wearer to read minds."

Sylmare blinked. "Truly?"

"Yes, and this one," he touched a crown made of onyx, "gives the wearer a greater affinity for earth spells."

"I know that today is not the day, King Rohan, but if you could tell me what each does, I will catalog them properly so the information is not lost," Sylmare sounded like she could think of nothing more pleasurable to do.

"Of course, it would be my pleasure. I'm just glad that these weren't lost altogether. So much of the Aeturnal past is gone," Rohan said a little grimly.

He'd delved into many imperial libraries looking for scraps of their heritage with Finn by his side. They'd come up with the sun setting and cobwebs in their hair without any more information than when they'd started before the break of day. Thalanil had gone through all of his father and mother's papers. While he had found some things, Thalanil believed that much of it had been destroyed.

"I know that must be hard," Sylmare agreed. "But, in a way, you get to start history anew, King Rohan. A brighter, better history."

He smiled at her and said genuinely. "Thank you, Lady Sylmare."

"Now, I'm sure that you'd like to be alone to choose your and King Finrael's crowns for this special day. I'll come back and pack everything up when you're done," she said with a bow before taking her leave.

Rohan turned back to the glittering crowns. Each of them called to him, wanting to be re-energized and worn on an Aeturnal or Bonded One's brow once more. None of these had been worn by the Ravenspars since they had taken over the Empire's throne. As he had said to Sylmare, he was grateful that they hadn't been melted down or destroyed. But maybe even the Ravenspars–still raw after their encounter with the God of Death–had not wanted to destroy such treasures. But they had been kept in darkness too long. They needed to be seen in the light.

There was a knock on the antechamber's door. He lifted his head, surprised at the interruption, but wondered if it was Serxio with a last minute "emergency" involving wrestling Christopher into appropriate attire and out of his lab or if Leonid was clashing again with Nafi's overprotective guards.

But when he called, "Come!" he was surprised to see Artremaya enter his study a moment after.

The study was part of his and Finn's bedroom suite. He'd enlarged their quarters considerably. Now the bedroom was on the very top floor. Beneath it was a floor purely for clothes, armor, jewelry and weapons. Serxio was so pleased about the space for clothes though Rohan still resisted wearing anything but his leathers. The next floor down was his study and main sitting room for guests.

"King Rohan," she said warmly.

"Artremaya."

They embraced and kissed each other on the cheeks before breaking apart.

"What brings you here?" He asked her. "Nothing's wrong with your quarters or anything like that?"

She waved off such a thought. "Everything is perfect."

"Indeed, I should say that you look perfect," he told her.

She wore an icy-blue, empire-waisted gown. Her hair was piled atop her head in brilliant braids with only a few stray ones hanging artfully down on either side of her heart-shaped face. A silver amethyst crusted crown set atop her head along with a matching collar of stones around her throat. Her hands and arms were covered in silk gloves that went up to her elbows. She was carrying a deep blue enamel box in one of her gloved hands.

"You are too kind. I see you are not dressed yet," she teased him. "Hoping to still get a chance to wear your leathers?"

"Hope springs eternal!" he laughed. "I don't think Finn would object."

"He wouldn't."

"And have you made any adjustments to your own outfit?" he asked.

She lifted up the hem of her dress to show practical knee-high boots dyed to match her dress. "So if something exciting happens like it always does with you and Finrael, I'll be prepared."

He grinned. "I *hope* the most exciting thing is seeing Leonid and Serxio on the dance floor."

"I have promised both of them a dance tonight!" she laughed, putting one gloved hand against her chest. "But I know you're busy preparing." Her eyes fell to the crowns. "My goodness!"

"I know. I know," he sighed. "When I asked Lady Sylmare to find the Aeturnal crowns I thought there would be a few."

"Evidently a *few* means dozens to the Aeturnals and each is more beautiful than the last," she said with a shake of her head. "And here I came to bring you a token from Sultane for the wedding."

He lifted an eyebrow as she offered him the box. "Artremaya, you didn't have to–"

"It's a tradition to give a friend something of yours on their wedding," she interrupted him gently. "All the royal gifts will come later. This is just from me to you."

"Well, then I am very excited," he said as he eagerly opened the box and found a silver wolf charm that immediately made him think of Tyreon. "Beautiful!" He immediately slipped it on a silver chain and put it on. "Thank you!"

"It's to give you strength against Tyreon and his family when they invade your bed," she teased him.

"Maybe he'll think I'm the alpha now?" Rohan laughed. "We do have a big bed now. There's enough space so that Finn, me, Tyreon, Skye and their grown pups could all sprawl out and not even touch one another. But where do they go?"

"Right on top of you!" Her laughter was infectious. "Like I said, the charm is to give you strength."

"I'll need it." He embraced her again. "Thank you for being such a good friend to Finn and me."

"You have been equally as good a friend to me and all of Sultane. And you were right that night in

the rose garden about the burdens and joys of leadership," she said with a fond smile. "My role got bigger, not smaller when we all joined together. All of the people of the Empire are our charges and that is something I can pass along to my children and their children and on and on. I know that they will be as good of friends to you and Finrael as we are now."

Rohan nodded his agreement. Thalanil had feared that it would be hard for him to stop aging and fully embrace his Aeturnal blood. But it had not. From the day that he'd built the stables, his aging had begun to slow. He knew the date it had stopped. It was the one month anniversary of their victory over Marikoth, when he'd suffused the power stone network with life. So Artremaya was correct that he would be there for all of her descendants and he would remember her as he befriended each and every one of them.

"I will let you get back to choosing the crowns and getting dressed." She gave him a stern look that he could almost imagine Serxio having told her to impart.

"It will be as you say, Queen Artremaya," he said with a bow.

Laughing, she left the room. But he was not left alone for long. He just had a moment to put down the now empty box and pick up a lovely gold crown with three large rubies in the front when he was joined by another visitor. It was Hugues. He was dressed in crimson and gold, the colors of the De Clares, but there were the Aeturnal infinity symbols woven into the collar and cuffs.

"Rohan, you haven't picked a crown yet? And you're not dressed!" His uncle frowned. "And I hear that Finrael is not even in the castle?"

"Finn went to get some special wine," Rohan answered as he put the crown down. This one was beautiful, but it just didn't fit either him or Finn. It allowed the wearer greater power over fire spells, especially one called Dragon's Tongue.

"Wine?"

"A special vintage that Maeve's family put away. He wants something from the Ashtons at the feast," Rohan said.

"Ah, well, so it's *not* because he wants to ride his wyvern instead of attending to official business?" Hugues' lips quirked into a smile.

"It's our wedding, Uncle. I think Finn and I can ignore official business today."

He lifted up a crown of woven silver that looked like vines. There were ravens peeking out of the foliage. Their eyes were diamonds and there was a huge square emerald on the front, the same color as Finn's eyes. Rohan smiled. This crown was the one for Finn. He filled it with power once more and was further pleased to note that the power it gave was one of protection. A shield would appear and keep the wearer from harm.

Perfect. Now I just need to choose one for myself.

He looked down at the crowns with slight consternation. There were so many, but none were calling to him. Today, he would wear Aeturnal white and gold while Finn would be dressed in black and silver. So a gold-based crown would seem appropriate.

"Are all these Aeturnal crowns?" Hugues looked down at them with interest.

Rohan nodded. "But I actually am glad you're here to speak of crowns."

"Well, I was here to hurry you along," Hugues said.

"Serxio?"

"Serxio," Hugues admitted.

"So the man is not going to come here himself to prod me? He already sent Artremaya," Rohan laughed.

"Oh, he will, but he is flying about right now to make sure that everything is being handled. He

stated, and I quote, that he will come to you at the very last moment when you cannot ignore him," Hugues said.

"Oh, good. But back to what I wanted to speak to you about." Rohan walked over to his desk to a rectangular case. He put a hand on the top. Hugues joined him. He drew in a sharp breath as he recognized what it was.

"Rohan, that is the case for Rirea's–"

"Crown for its king. Yes, it is," Rohan said. "And I wish it to be yours as well as the rule of Rirea."

"But you are–"

"Finn and I are the kings of the entire Empire. Rirea is one of its vassal states. It needs its own ruler," Rohan said. "You are the logical choice. You are Finn and my choice."

Hugues blinked and suddenly turned his head as tears formed. "I never expected to be king. I wanted to serve you. I know you doubted that for a time–"

"Well, now you *will* be king and, by doing so, you will serve me," Rohan told him. "This is our wedding gift to you."

"I… I am beyond honored, nephew," Hugues said.

They embraced. The year after Marikoth's death had healed the wounds between them as Hugues had thrown himself into serving him and Finn without holding back anything. While he and Thalanil still had a frosty relationship, it was no longer antagonistic, which was likely the best that could be hoped for.

When they broke apart, Rohan said, "We will arrange your coronation before the fall harvest."

Hugues nodded and smiled broadly. "It shall be done, your majesty."

"Now, I really need to pick my own crown," Rohan laughed.

"I will let Serxio know that you are working on things in here at a fast clip," Hugues promised him. "Let's just hope that Finrael will get back soon."

"I'm sure he will."

* * *

SILVER SOUL'S tower was not empty when she landed down lightly, and it wasn't only the stablemaster there to greet them. His father and step brothers were waiting for him.

I think I may be in a little trouble, Silver Soul, Finn admitted.

Christopher has been roused from his lair to come to mine. And you are covered in dust from the cellars and nowhere near ready for your wedding, Silver Soul chuckled. *I would definitely say you are in trouble.*

He lightly slid off her back while she went to stretch out and sun herself.

"Father! Christopher! Miles! What brings you three here?" Finn asked as he carefully carried the satchel with the clinking bottles inside of it.

His father's eyes immediately dropped down to the bottles. "Ah, you picked up the Old Vineyards blend."

"I did! Which is why I was gone until now," Finn cleared his throat and shifted from foot to foot.

"I don't see why I couldn't be in my lab this morning if Finn got to go flying," Christopher groused.

He was wearing a very attractive set of silver and green robes. He was doing his best to wrinkle

them as he tightly held his arms over his chest.

"Finn shouldn't have been flying!" Miles reminded Christopher and gave Finn a disappointed look.

Finn bit his cheek to not smile unrepentantly. "We needed the wine."

"My beloved son, we have all the wine in the realm here." Thalanil cupped his cheek and picked a cobweb out of his hair that the wind had not blown away. "And now you must bathe again as you smell of… wyvern."

Finn sniffed himself. "I–okay, yes, you're right. I do."

"Aren't you excited to get married? I am excited. The choices of clothes alone has been exhausting but so rewarding as it always is to dress your father, but–"

"You look very nice yourself, Miles," Finn said.

Miles pinked happily. He was wearing green as well. Both he and Christopher were considered part of his father's house. So green was the color his father had decided to choose to designate his post-king life.

"It's the color of your mother's eyes and yours, Finrael," Thalanil had told him.

"Yes, your father had them designed specifically for me and I love them," Miles admitted, hugging himself happily.

"These clothes are not practical," Christopher sighed. "One drop of acid and–"

Miles whipped around and squawked, "You are not to use them in the lab, Christopher!"

"Exactly, which is why they are not practical," Christopher said. "Now, Finn, you need to get into impractical clothes."

"Indeed, I do. Rohan must have picked out our new crowns. I'm looking forward to seeing them," Finn said as he started to walk to the stairs, but the others didn't follow right away. He stopped and turned back. "What? I thought you were all eager to get me into my wedding clothes–"

"Father's dead," Miles said.

Finn's mouth opened and shut. He wasn't sure how to respond or how to feel. He was more concerned about Miles and Christopher.

"The boys weren't sure if they should tell you or not," Thalanil said.

"But I said we should," Christopher put in. "It's a day of celebration and that's another thing to celebrate."

Finn moved over to Christopher and touched his stiff shoulder. "Are you sure you're all right–"

"Yes, Finn, I assure you that I am more than glad. For now I know that he can never…"

"Never come back," Miles whispered.

Thalanil patted Miles' back. "Even if he had tried to, he would not have been allowed to get anywhere near."

Miles perked up at the touch. "Thank you, King Thalanil."

"Yes, that's true," Christopher said. "But still, it's a relief to know he's well and truly gone."

"How–how did he die? Do we know?" Finn asked.

"Tearlach," Thalanil said quietly. "He went foolishly into Achuvia and attempted to defraud a widow and her son."

"Really? At it again, was he?" Finn's voice was sharper than he intended and Miles flinched at the sound. Softening his tone, Finn said, "Then he got no less than he deserved."

"Justice was served, I think," Thalanil said.

By Tearlach. He must have realized it was my stepfather. I'm sure he did. And he handled it as he handles all things that threaten me and mine.

Finn shook himself and smiled. “I hope that this doesn’t make either of you unhappy or distract you from the joys of the day–”

“Not at all, Finn!” Miles burbled.

“Definitely not,” Christopher assured him.

“Then let us not speak of him again this day at least,” Finn said.

The other two nodded eagerly. This time when Finn went to the stairs the others followed after him. When he promised them that he was heading towards his quarters with Rohan, they broke off to join the other wedding guests. Finn turned his steps to the tower that was named for Tearlach. He was soon at the door. He knocked and the Achuvian king’s voice rang out for him to enter. He was not surprised to find Tearlach and his dogs sharing a chicken.

“Are you ever not hungry?” Finn grinned.

“Never! Especially after the hunt we had this morning. Glorious!” Tearlach enthused as he threw a bone for one of the dogs. “Now that the imperial creatures are not hidden behind the Wall, there are actually challenges out there!”

“I see,” Finn laughed. “Well, I’m glad you had a good morning.”

“It is going to be a good *day* and *night*, yes, cousin?”

Finn nodded. “Yes, indeed. I just wanted to…” He let out a breath. “Miles and Christopher told me about Gerard.”

Tearlach’s eyebrows rose as he chewed with his mouth open, but then he nodded in recognition. “Yes, a scoundrel and a thief. He earned his fate, I’m afraid.”

“I’m sure he did break all sorts of Achuvian laws,” Finn agreed.

Tearlach’s eyes remained on him. “He broke the laws of *family*.”

And in those words, Finn knew that Tearlach had imposed justice for Finn, Christopher and Miles, along with Maeve, upon Gerard Steward’s head.

“Thank you,” Finn whispered.

“No thanks are needed, little one. You know this,” Tearlach reminded him.

Finn found his eyes filled with happy tears. “Yes, I know. But I give them to you anyways.”

“Then I accept them. But, gah! You are dirty! You need to be pretty for our Rohan on your wedding day!” Tearlach told him.

“What about you?” Finn pointed to the usual set of black armor that Tearlach seemingly always wore.

“Oh, I will give my armor a shine and it will be perfect,” Tearlach chuckled.

“It will be. All right. I will see you at the wedding and party afterwards.”

“It is a promise.”

Finn took his leave of Tearlach and had just made it to the door to his quarters with Rohan when Serxio and Leonid sprang out in front of him.

“You!” Serxio pointed a finger at him. A finger that was covered in fuschia.

“Me?” Finn squeaked.

“Missing in action. Not dressed. Smelling of wyvern and… wine?” Serxio grabbed the satchel from Finn’s hand and stuck his head inside.

“Yes, it’s a special vintage from Tanglewood. I want it served at dinner,” Finn explained.

“Oh, laddie, you’ve had him worried,” Leonid chuckled as he pointed at Serxio.

“Worried? No! Think of this wedding as a play, Leonid, with Finn and Rohan as the irreplaceable leads and me as the director and the entire fate of the theater riding on this one performance. So *worried* is a far lesser word than what I was feeling,” Serxio informed them both.

Guilt really did prick Finn this time. “I’m so sorry, Serxio. I admit that things have been working so effortlessly that I didn’t realize you’ve been the one who's been only making it seem that way when it isn’t.”

Serxio let out a long breath. “You are more than forgiven, Finn. So long as you get dressed! Now! Now!”

Finn opened the door to their chambers only to nearly run into Rohan. His breath caught in his throat as he saw his beloved in his full wedding regalia. White and gold were the new Aeturnal colors. Most of Rohan’s outfit from his boots to his form-fitting pants and flaring collared shirt was the purest white. He wore a long coat that skimmed his muscular form and came to his knees with a gold silk lining. There were infinity symbols stitched in gold as well on the outside of the coat. On his head sat a golden crown set with diamonds.

“My goodness,” Serxio breathed.

“You look… amazing, your majesty,” Leonid said.

Finn couldn’t speak at how handsome and kingly Rohan looked. Realizing that he was just staring open-mouthed when Rohan chuckled, Finn shook himself.

“Rohan, you are a sight to see!” Finn finally got out.

“And you should be seeing him at the wedding and not before!” Serxio cried.

“I’m glad I saw him now. I wouldn’t be able to speak my vows otherwise,” Finn said.

“Thank you, beloved. I look forward to seeing you dressed in another outfit from a god again,” Rohan smiled.

“I could not outshine you.”

“You do even now, my beloved.”

Rohan leaned in and kissed him. Serxio though stuck an arm between them so that Rohan’s clean, white robes didn’t touch Finn’s admittedly stained ones.

“Enough kissing! You need to get ready, Finn!” Serxio pointed to the rooms beyond.

“All right, all right,” Finn said. “I won’t be long.”

“You better not be,” Serxio told him. “We can’t start the show without you.”

“I left you the crown I thought was best on the desk,” Rohan said.

“Then I will see you shortly.”

* * *

ROHAN STOOD at the end of the Great Hall where Ryleth awaited to bind him and Finn before the populace and the gods. She was still Finn’s Mentor, but her priestess status had been fully restored. Hugues, Serxio and Leonid were all standing to his left as groomsmen, while Christopher and Miles were on his right as Finn’s representatives.

The hall was filled with countless people in brilliant clothes rather like a flock of birds. There were not only nobles, but also common folk that Finn and he had decided should get pride of place too. Of course, Magna, Jacob and Emmott had front row seats. Tearlach, Nafi and Artremaya sat right beside them.

Hannah appeared at the end of the hall with her basket of rose petals that had been plucked that morning from the rose garden. She wore a dress of white, silver and gold. Beside her were Tyreon, Skye and their grown pups. A huge smile was on her face as she marched with the wolves solemnly down the aisle depositing flower petals as she went. The sweet singing of the Fae and human choir

accompanied their little march. As soon as they made it to the end, Christopher and Miles helped her to her seat while the wolves eagerly looked at Rohan for approval.

"You did well," he mouthed to them.

More tail wagging as they went to sit down near Tearlach, who was definitely tempting them with some bit of food he had secreted on his person. The Achuvien king was convinced he could win them over.

Thalanil appeared next in forest green, his long black hair bound by a simple silver circlet. He turned to reveal Finn. The guests let out gasps of pleasure at the sight of the beautiful Fae prince. Death's Chosen. Rohan's heart skipped a beat and words escaped him too.

Finn's outfit was a study in black and silver. The high collar of his long coat framed his delicate throat. His arms were bare except for the silver armlets that snaked up both arms that matched the strands in the crown that Rohan had chosen for him. A black sleeveless shirt, black tailored pants and thigh-high black boots with silver ravens stitched into optimal spots completed the picture.

Finn linked his one arm with his father and the two Ravenspars walked down the aisle together. When they reached Rohan, Finn released his father's arm and took Rohan's hand. Rohan smiled through tears that he couldn't hold back. Thalanil was smiling and crying too. Finn looked ethereal and utterly happy. Thalanil went to stand beside Christopher and Miles. Miles, of course, made sure his robes were perfect while he and Finn took their places in front of Ryleth.

"In so many ways, this ceremony is hardly necessary," Ryleth intoned as they both faced her. "You are our kings already and your souls are one. What we do today is… an excuse for a *ball*."

Everyone in the hall laughed with Finn and Rohan grinning the most. Serxio nodded enthusiastically. He had been waiting for this for a long time. Leonid patted his back and shook his head, but he was smiling too.

"But I must admit how honored I am to play even this small, unnecessary role in your true and great love," Ryleth said. "For not only are you my friends, but our courageous leaders who brought us from a time of darkness into the light."

Rohan looked down at Finn's smiling face and he felt his heart tremble. Finn consenting to be his in this way was a dream he'd never even known he'd wanted until he met the young man. And even then, when it had seemed impossible, he had *dreamed* of this moment. Now it was coming true.

"As you pledge yourself to each other, all of us pledge ourselves to you," Ryleth intoned. "This land–this Empire–will forever shine in the light of your love for one another, your love for us and our love for you. This day will never be forgotten for it is the dawn of a new age. One of plenty and prosperity and *peace*. Now, you have prepared your own vows."

Rohan's heart was in his throat, but the words in both ancient Aeturnal and Common left his lips easily, "Finrael–my Finn–my greatest goal is and always will be your happiness. My heart and soul are yours to command. You have changed me forever and I am all the better for it. I pledge to you to be forever at your side. I love you, Finn."

Finn's smile was brilliant even as tears fell down his lovely face. "Rohan, when I came into this world, I never even dreamed of someone like you. But when we met, I knew that I would give everything of myself to you. There would be nothing I would hold back. I pledge to you to be forever at your side. I love you, Rohan."

Simple, but beautiful gold and silver woven bands were exchanged between them. Then they turned back to Ryleth once more, their hands clasped together.

"I now pronounce you what you already are: bonded to one another," Ryleth said, tears streaking her face, too. "Congratulations!"

The two of them kissed. It was a soft kiss, but with the promise of so much more. Then they faced the hall of well-wishers as the crowd erupted in roars of joy.

* * *

THEY HAD LEFT the Great Hall for the outdoors. So many people had come to attend the wedding that even with Reave Castle's new and improved size, it still wasn't enough to hold everyone. So, instead, tables and chairs had been set outside under the moon and stars.

Dinner had been a wild success. It had been truly an ever-expanding feast, and Cook Shelton had outdone herself on every front. Fae and human intermixed, eating and drinking together. Lady Regalus was present. She lifted her glass to Finn and Rohan. Her son was safely by her side. Lord Camrys came over to compliment both of them on their Aeturnal. He had schooled Finn extensively upon it. But now the crowd was eager to move and dance the night away. Finn's own feet were tapping beneath the table as he curled against Rohan's side. Rohan's hand stroked his back.

"I admit, Serxio, that you know how to put on a pretty good ball," Leonid said as he tore into a chicken leg and drank his beer.

Serxio was trying desperately–in Finn's opinion anyway–to ignore all the stains that had appeared during dinner on Leonid's coat as he said, "This was dinner. The ball is all about dancing."

"Ready to break more hearts, are you?" Leonid asked between mouthfuls of meat and ale.

"Of course! It would not be a ball without people falling in love with me hopelessly." Serxio pressed a hand to his rather outrageous fuschia outfit that was silk and velvet and feathers, but somehow worked.

Leonid chuckled.

"You shall not get me on the dance floor," Christopher said, but not unkindly as he had eaten a good dinner in Finn's opinion and looked almost ready to sit for a while with people.

"Oh, no, young man." Serxio wagged a finger at Christopher. "You shall be dancing at least once tonight. If not more!"

Christopher snorted. "Who could get me out on the dance floor?"

"Why, I could, Christopher!" Magna cried as she happily bounced over to him. "You're going to take me for a spin out there with all those high and mighty folk, aren't you?"

"Christopher, you can't turn Magna down," Jacob chuckled.

"I'll take you out, Magna," Emmott offered.

But Magna shooed him away. "You're a terrible dancer, Emmott, but I bet our Christopher is graceful."

"When I step on your feet, you will think otherwise," Christopher said, but he stood up. "They are starting to play music. Shall we?"

Magna nodded eagerly and took his hand.

Serxio leaped to his feet and pointed at Leonid. "We must get people out there to dance. Come, Leonid! Let's show them all how it is done!"

Leonid snorted, but he cleaned his hands on his napkin before joining Serxio out in the center of the vast lawn.

"Hannah, would you like to dance with me?" Miles asked.

Hannah, who had been wide eyed and amazed at everything, nodded in happiness. "Oh, yes, Miles. Thank you!"

“Since I know I cannot take Rohan from my cousin, would you care to dance, Queen Artremaya?” Tearlach asked.

He actually bowed with amazing grace. And though he was wearing his armor just like he’d said he would, somehow he almost looked handsome. Artremaya inclined her head and took his hand. The two of them proceeded to dance quite beautifully together, which had Hugues lifting an eyebrow.

“Who would have thought?” Hugues said.

Nafi chuckled. “Now that would be an interesting pair!”

“What about you, Nafi?” his father asked. “Is there anyone special out there for you?”

“I would have said, Thalanil, that I was too old before all of this began,” Nafi said, but then narrowed his eyes as Ryleth approached. “But I think that I have been given a new lease on life. Dear lady, will you accept this dance?”

Ryleth blinked but nodded with a bemused smile on her lips. “I shall be honored.”

“Father, Hugues, won’t you two be dancing tonight?” Finn asked.

The wine that his mother’s family had laid down so long ago was open and both men were drinking it rather solemnly. Hugues met Thalanil’s gaze. They had both loved his mother and both had lost her in the end. It was something that had made them enemies, but perhaps it could bind them as friends.

“I think there will come a time when I dance again, Finrael, but tonight I shall watch others,” Thalanil said.

“I agree. There will be dances in our future,” Hugues said avuncularly. “Now, what about the two of you? Are you going to dance?”

Finn looked up into Rohan’s beloved face. “Most definitely.”

“Nothing could stop us,” Rohan added.

The two of them rose up from their chairs to join the others on the dance floor. The moon beamed down upon them. The stars sparkled. A raven passed over the revelers, but no one feared it.

Finn and Rohan danced with each other and brought their friends into their duet as the night wore on. The wolves and Tearlach’s dogs raced around them happily. The people ate, drank and laughed. No one who went to their wedding would ever forget that night. It was spoken of with reverence. For it truly was the dawning of a new age.

And everyone lived happily ever after.

The End

Thank you so much for reading the end of this massive story. I sincerely hope you enjoyed it!

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Thank you again for your support!

X. Aratare/Raythe